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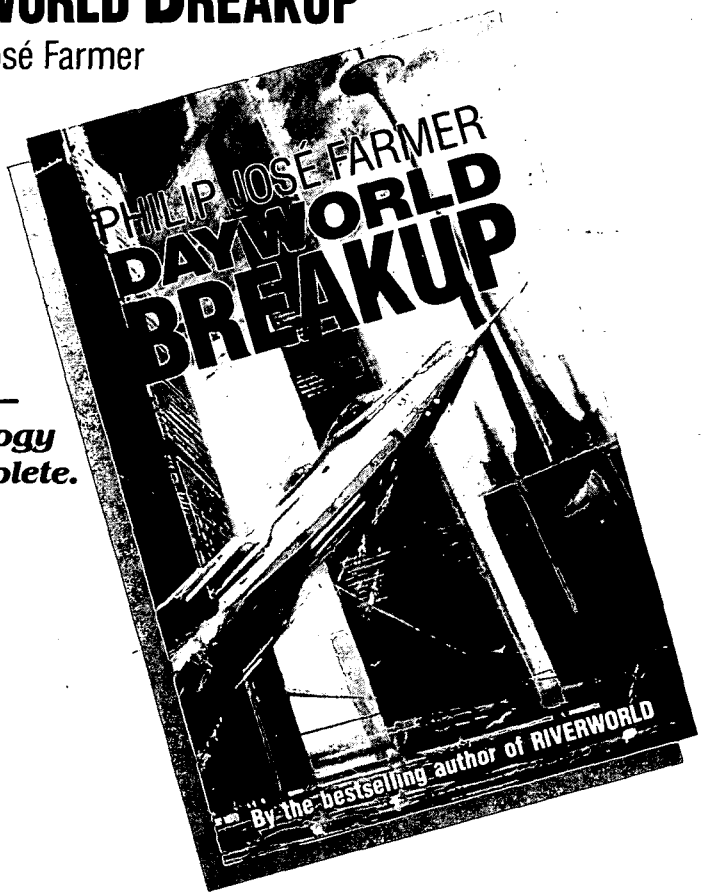

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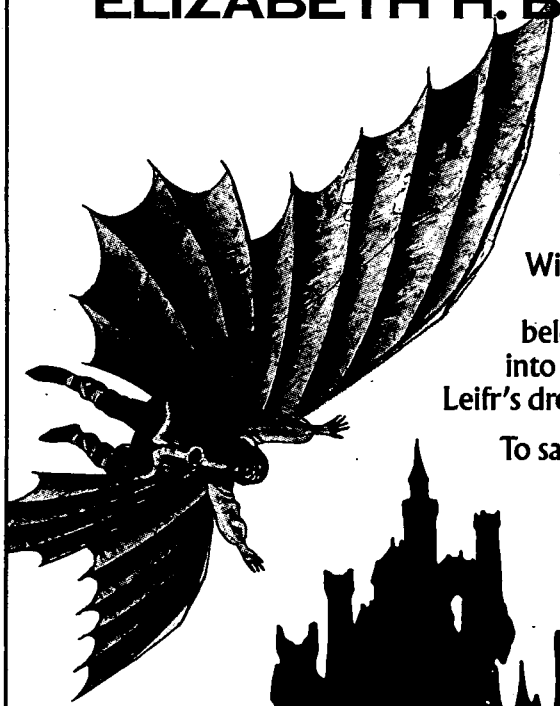

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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JULY • 41st Year of Publication

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David Brin's science fiction is always entertaining and usually provocative as well. Consider, for example, this fascinating extrapolation of a Japan in the not so distant future and a young couple who give their child a remarkable head-start.

DR. PAK'S PRESCHOOL

By David Brin

HANDS, THOSE STRONG hands holding her down upon the tabletop. . . . In her pain and confusion, they reminded her of those tentacled sea creatures of fabled days that ola-chan had described when she was little, whose habit it was to drag unfortunate mariners down to a watery doom.

Those hands, clasping, restraining — she cried out for mercy, knowing those hands would ignore her protests, along with any pretense at modesty.

Needles pricked her skin, hot localized distractions from her futile struggle. Soon the drugs took effect. A soporific coolness spread along her limbs, and she lost the will to resist any longer. The hands loosened their grip, and turned to perform yet other violations.

Stormy images battered her wavering sense of self. Moiré patterns and Möbius chains — somehow she knew these things and their names without ever having learned them. And there was something else — something

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that hurt even to contemplate — a container with two openings, and none at all . . . a bottle whose interior was on the outside. . . .

It was a problem to be solved. A desperate quandary. A life-or-death puzzle in higher-level geometry.

The words and images whirled, hands groped about her, but at that moment all she could do was moan.

"Wakarimasen!" *She cried aloud.* "Wakarimasen!"

1.

REIKO SHOULD have been more suspicious the night her husband came home earlier than usual, and announced that she would accompany him on his next business trip to Seoul. That evening, however, when Tetsuo showed her the white paper folder containing two red-and-green airline boarding passes, Reiko could think only in the heady language of joy.

He remembers.

Her elation did not show, of course. She bowed to her husband and spoke words of submissive acceptance, maintaining decorous reticence. Tetsuo, in his turn, was admirably restrained. He grunted and turned his attention back to his supper, as if the matter had really been of little consequence after all.

Nevertheless, Reiko was certain his gruffness overlaid a well of true feeling.

Why else, she thought, would he do such an unheard-of thing? And so near the anniversary of their marriage? That second ticket in the envelope surely meant there was still a bit of rebel under Tetsuo's now-so-conventional exterior — still a remnant of the free spirit she had given her heart to years ago.

He remembers, she thought jubilantly.

And it was not yet nine in the evening. For Tetsuo to return so early for supper at home, instead of having it with business colleagues at some city bar, was exceptional in itself. Reiko bowed again and suggested awakening their daughter. Yukiko so seldom got to spend time with her father.

"*Iye,*" Tetsuo said curtly, vetoing the idea. "Let the child sleep. I wish to retire early tonight anyway."

Reiko's heart seemed to flutter within her rib cage at his implication.

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After clearing away dinner, she made the required preparations, just in case.

And indeed, later that night he joined her in their bed — for the first time in months without beer or tobacco or the scent of other women commingling in his breath. Tetsuo made love to her with an intensity she recalled, but which, of late, she had begun to think she had imagined all along.

Almost exactly six years ago, they had been newlyweds, trapped joyously in each others' eyes as they honeymooned in Fiji, hardly noticing the mountains or the reefs or the exotic native dancers for the resonant happiness, the amplified *autarchia* of their union. And for the following year also, it had remained that way for the two of them, as if they were characters from a happy romantic tale, brought into the real word. In those days even the intense pressure of Tetsuo's career had seemed to take second place to their love.

It had lasted, in fact, up to the time when Reiko became pregnant. Until then she hadn't believed they would ever stop being lovers, and begin the long tedium of life as a married couple, But they did.

Tetsuo closed his eyes tightly and shuddered, then collapsed in a lassitude of spent coitus. His breath was sweet, his weight a pleasure for her to bear; and with her fingertips, Reiko lightly traced the familiar patterns of his back. The boy she had known was filling out, gaining the looser fleshiness of a grown man. Tonight, however, she felt a slight relaxing of the tension that had slowly mounted along his spine over the grinding months and years.

Tetsuo seldom spoke of his work, although she knew it was stressful and hard. His supervisors seemed still to hold him under suspicion over an incident a few years ago, when he had tried unsuccessfully to introduce un-Japanese business practices into the firm. This, she imagined, was one reason why he had grown so distant, allowing the flame of their passion to bank back in favor of more important matters. That was, of course, as it would have to be.

But now all seemed restored. Tetsuo had remembered; all was well in the world.

When, instead of simply rolling over and going to sleep, Tetsuo stroked her hair briefly and spoke to her softly in unintelligible mumblings of fondness, Reiko felt a glow like the sun rise within her.

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2.

IT WAS her first trip to the airport since the honeymoon, so long ago. Reiko could not help feeling disappointed, for the experience was not at all the same this time.

How could it be? She chided herself for making comparisons. After all, different destinations attracted different classes of people. The occupants of this departure lounge could hardly be expected to be like those down the hall a ways, bound from Tokyo to Fiji, or Hawaii, or Saipan — young couples close-orbiting on trajectories of bliss.

Sometimes on such honeymoon flights, groups of newlyweds would have singing contests to help pass the time, clapping with courteous enthusiasm however terrible the voice. After all, there were harmonies that went beyond music, and much holding of hands.

Travelers not bound for the resorts dressed differently, spoke and behaved differently. It was as if the departure terminal were a series of slices of modern life — each distinct, representing a separate phase or molting.

Jets destined for Europe or America generally carried tour groups of prosperous older couples, or gaggles of students, all dressed alike and hanging together as if their periphery were patrolled by dangerous animals, ready at any moment to snap up the unwary straggler.

And, of course, there were the intense businessmen, who spent their transit time earnestly studying their presentation materials . . . modern samurai . . . warriors for Japan on the new battlefields of commerce.

Finally there were the gates nearest Reiko, from which departed flights for Bangkok, Manila, Seoul. These, too, carried businessmen, but bound instead for the rewards of success. Women told each other rumors about what went on during these . . . *kairaiku* expeditions. Reiko had never really been sure what to believe, but she sensed the anticipation of the ticket holders in this particular lounge. Most of the passengers wore suits, but their mood did not strike her as businesslike. They carried briefcases, but nobody seemed much interested in working.

Reiko had few illusions about the "commerce" that went on during such trips. Still, the Koreans were industrializing rapidly. Certainly there were many bona fide dealings, as well as junkets. Tetsuo's company had to be sending him for real business reasons, or why would he have invited her along? Reiko wondered if all those stories had been exaggerated after all.

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A contingent of foreigners awaited the opening of the gate with typical *gaijin* impatience, speaking loudly, staring impertinently. An orderly queue of Japanese formed behind the jostling Europeans and Americans.

Reiko's sister, Yumi, held Yukiko up to wave good-bye to her parents. The little girl seemed confused and unhappy, but determined to behave well. Already Yukiko exhibited a sense of public propriety, and she did not shame them by crying. As Tetsuo led her down the crowded ramp, Reiko felt a pang of separation, but she knew Yukiko would be all right for a few days with her aunt. At worst their daughter would be spoiled by too much attention.

On board, Reiko saw there were a few other married couples besides themselves, all seated toward the rear of the airplane. The women seemed less at ease than their husbands, and listened attentively as the stewardesses went over emergency procedures. Finally the great machine hurtled down the runway and propelled itself into the sky.

When the safety lights turned off, the cabin began to fill with drifts of cigarette smoke. Men got up and drifted forward toward the lounge. Soon there was heard, beyond the partition, the clinking of glasses and harsh laughter.

Reiko discreetly observed the other women, sitting quietly with empty seats between them. Some gazed out upon the green mountains of Honshu as the plane gradually gained altitude. Others conversed together in low tones. A few just looked down at their hands.

Reiko pondered. So many husbands could not be bringing their wives if their business in Seoul were only concupiscent pleasure. Could they?

She realized she was staring, and quickly lowered her eyes. Still, Reiko had noticed something: all the other wives aboard were young, like herself. She turned, intending to whisper this interesting observation to her husband, and blinked quickly when she found herself facing an empty seat.

While she had been looking around, Tetsuo had quietly slipped away. Soon Reiko heard his familiar laughter coming from just beyond the partition.

She looked down then, and found fascinating the texture and fine lines that traced the backs of her own hands.

* * *

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3.

THAT EVENING in their hotel room, Tetsuo told her why he had brought her along with him to Seoul. "It is time for us to have a son," he said matter-of-factly.

Reiko nodded dutifully. "A son is to be hoped for."

Tetsuo loved his daughter, of course, but he clearly wanted to have a boy in the family, and Reiko could hope for nothing better than to please him. And yet, had he not been the one insisting she buy birth-control devices weekly from the neighborhood Skin Lady, and use them so carefully?

"We can afford to have only one more child," he went on, telling her what she already knew. "So we shall want to make certain the second is a boy."

Only half-seriously, she suggested, "Shujin, I shall go to Mizuko Jizo Temple daily, and burn incense."

If she hoped to draw a smile from him, Reiko was disappointed. Once upon a time, he had been witty in his mockery of the ancient superstitions, and they had shared this delicious cynicism between them — she the daughter of a scientist, and he the bright young businessman who had been to university in America. Now, though, Tetsuo nodded and seemed to accept her promise at face value.

"Good. However, we shall supplement prayer with technology." From his jacket pocket, he withdrew a slim brochure, which he handed to her. He left Reiko then to read the pamphlet in their small room while he went down to the bar to drink with friends.

Reiko stared down at the bold type, glittering in stark *romanji* script.

Pak Jung Clinic
Gender Selection Service
Seoul, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok,
Taipei, Mexico City, Cairo, Bombay
Satisfaction Is Guaranteed

A little while later, she got undressed and went to bed. But lying there alone in the darkness, she found she could not sleep.

* * *

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4.

THEY WERE actually quite kind at the clinic. Nicer, at least, than Reiko had anticipated. In her mind she had pictured a stark, sterile-white hospital setting. It was reassuring, then, to sit in the pastel waiting room, with cranes and other symbols of good fortune traced delicately upon the wall reliefs. Tetsuo remained behind when her name was called, but he did smile and offer her a nod of encouragement as the nurse bowed and ushered her into the examination room.

The doctors were distant and professional, for which Reiko was grateful. They tapped and thumped and measured her temperature. When it came time to take various samples, there was only a little pain, and her modesty was protected by a screen across the middle of her body.

Then she was returned to the waiting room. One of the doctors accompanying her bowed and told Tetsuo that she would be ready to conceive in three days' time. Tetsuo replied with a polite hiss of satisfaction, and exchanged further bows with the doctor before they turned to leave together.

During the next few days, Reiko saw little of Tetsuo. He really did, it seemed, have business to do in Seoul — meetings and sales analyses. The clinic provided a guide to show Reiko and a few other prospective mothers the sights, such as they were. They saw the Olympic Village, the war memorials, the great public museums. Only occasionally did some passer-by glance sourly at them on hearing spoken Japanese. All in all, Reiko found the Koreans much nicer than she had been led to expect from the stories she had heard since childhood. But then, perhaps, the Koreans she met felt the same way about her. It was all very interesting.

Still, this was no second honeymoon. Not the resumption of bliss she had hoped for. When Tetsuo returned late to their hotel room the following two nights, she could tell that he had spent part of his day in close proximity to other women.

Even the explanation offered by one of the other wives did not much ease Reiko's disappointment. "The clinic prefers to have some fresh semen to supplement the frozen samples they stored during our husbands' past visits," Mrs. Nakamura confided while they waited together on the third day. Reiko's head spun in confusion.

"You — you mean he has been — donating for some time?"

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Mrs. Nakamura nodded, confirming that Tetsuo had had this in mind for months at least. On at least his last two trips to Seoul, he must have visited the clinic to collect his seed for freezing. Or, more likely, he had used the *kairaiku* house next door, which Reiko was now certain maintained a business relationship with the Pak Jung doctors.

"I am sure the place is licensed and regularly inspected," Mrs. Nakamura added. And Reiko knew which establishment she meant. Reiko nearly bristled at the presumption, that Tetsuo would ever *think* of patronizing an unlicensed house, and so risk his family's health with some filthy *gaijin* disease.

She restrained herself, knowing that part of her passion arose out of a sense of bitter disappointment. Somehow Reiko managed to see a bright side to it all. The donated material probably has to be prepared quickly. That is why he continued to use the pleasure house, even when I was *here*.

She was well aware that she was rationalizing. But right at that moment, rationalization was all that stood between Reiko and despair. When, a little while later, she had to endure intromission by cold glass and plastic, Reiko lay back and clasped her arms tightly across her breasts, dreaming of her first conception, which had come the natural way, with her hands and legs wrapped around a living, breathing, sighing man, her loving husband.

5.

THREE WEEKS after they returned to Tokyo, it became apparent they had succeeded — at least so far as impregnation was concerned. Queasiness and vomiting confirmed the joyous news as surely as the stained blotter of the little home-test kit. As for whether the child-to-be was male, several more weeks would pass before anyone could tell. But Tetsuo was full of confidence, and that made Reiko happy.

Little Yukiko had reached the age where she attended preschool half of every day. Reiko would deliver her daughter to the playground entrance and watch all the children line up in their little uniforms, attentive to every phase of the carefully choreographed exercise activity. They seemed to be enjoying school, clapping together in time as the instructors led them through teaching rhymes. But who could actually tell what was best for a child?

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Reiko often wondered if they were doing the right thing, starting Yukiko's education so early, a full two years before the law required.

"Doozo ohairi, kudasai!" the headmaster called to her little charges. The neat rows of four-year-olds filed indoors under an arched doorway decorated with origami flowers. It all felt so alien and remote from Reiko's own childhood.

Modern times are very hard, she knew. And Tetsuo was determined to provide their children with the very best advantages to face such a competitive world. Yukiko was one of only ten little girls in her *juku* preschool class, all the rest being boys. It was commonly said to be a waste to bother much on a female's education. But Tetsuo believed their daughter should also have a head start, at least compared with other girls.

Piping sounds of earnest recitation. . . . Reiko remembered that examinations in only four more weeks would determine what kindergarten would accept little Yukiko for admission. And for boys the cycle of *juku*, of compressed learning and scrutiny, began even earlier, with some parents spending small fortunes on special "baby universities."

A month ago there had been a news story about a six-year-old who took his own life in shame when he did not do well in an exam. . . . Reiko shuddered and turned away. She straightened her obi and looked downward as she hurried to the nearby station to catch the next train.

It seemed there was no escaping rush hour anymore. Staggered work schedules only spread the chaos over the entire day. Reiko endured being packed into the car by white-gloved station proctors. Automatically, she raised invisible curtains of privacy around her body and self, ignoring the close pressure of strangers — women with shopping bags at their feet, many of the men hiding their eyes within lurid, animated magazines — until the train at last reached her stop and spilled her out onto a platform near Kaygo University.

Smog and soot and noisy traffic had erased the semirural ambience she recalled from long ago. Reiko's earliest memories — from when she had been Yukiko's age — were of this ancient campus where she had grown up as a professor's daughter, playing quietly on the floor of a dusty study stacked high with aromatic books, the walls lined with fine works of makimono calligraphy. Unknown to her father, she used to concentrate and try to listen to his conversations with students and faculty and even *gaijin* visitors from foreign lands, certain in her childish belief that, over-

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time, she would absorb it all and one day come into that world of his, to share his work, his pride, his accomplishments.

When did I change my dreams? Reiko wondered.

Usually, memories of such childish fantasies made her smile. But today, for some reason, the recollection only made her feel sad.

I changed very early, she knew. And how can I be regretful, when I have everything?

Still, it was ironic that her sister, Yumi, so reticent as a child, had grown to become assertive and adept, while she, Reiko, could imagine no higher role, no greater honor, than to do her duty as a wife and mother.

It would have been nice to stop to visit her father. But today there would not be time. Anyway, Yumi should be the first one told the news. Reiko hurried across the street to the great row of commercial establishments facing the university — the phalanx of industrial giants whose benign partnership had helped Kaygo to thrive. The guard at the side gate of Fugisuku Enterprises recognized her as a former employee and frequent visitor. He smiled and bowed, asking her merely to impress her chop upon a clipboard before she passed through.

Reiko took the quickest route toward the Company Garden of Contemplation, a path taking her along a great glass wall. Beyond that barrier she could view one of the laboratories where Fugisuku manufactured the bioengineered products it was famous for worldwide.

Thousands of white cages lined the walls of the vast chamber, each containing three or four tiny, pale hamsters, all cloned to be exactly alike. Automatic machines picked up cages and delivered them at precise intervals to long benches, where masked technicians in white coats worked with needles and flashing scalpels, all to an unheard but insistent tempo.

Even through the glass, Reiko caught the familiar, musty rodent aroma. She had worked here for some years, up until the time of her first pregnancy. *Gaijin* "liberalism" had penetrated that far at least. Women no longer had to retire upon getting married. Frankly, though, Reiko did not miss the job all that much.

The rear doors opened upon a walled setting of peace and serenity in the middle of sprawling Tokyo. Out in the garden, beside carefully tended dwarf trees and neatly raked beds of sand, a ceremony was nearing completion under a delicately carved torii spirit gate. Reiko folded her hands and waited politely as the priest chanted and many of the women of Fugisuku

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bowed to an altar swathed in incense. Unconsciously, she joined in the prayer.

Oh Kami of Little Mammals, forgive us. Do not take revenge upon our children for what we do to you.

The monthly ritual was intended to appease the spirits of the slaughtered hamsters, who gave their lives in such numbers for the good of the company and their common prosperity. Once upon a time, the prayer gatherings had amused Reiko, but now she did not feel so sure. Did not all life strike a balance? The *gaijin* argued endlessly about the morality of mankind's exploitation of animals. "Save the whales!" they cried. "Save the krill!" But why would the Westerners be so obsessed with preserving inferior animals unless they, too, feared the implacable retribution of karma?

If animals did indeed possess kami, Fugisuku would certainly be haunted without the right protections. Barely after their eyes opened, the young hamsters were injected with viruses to stimulate production of antibodies and interferons. They were sacrificed by the thousands in order to produce just a few milligrams of precious refined molecules.

With new life now taking form within her, Reiko was not of a mind to ignore any possible danger. She fervently addded her own voice to the chant of propitiation.

Oh angry spirits, stay away from my child.

6.

LATER REIKO sat with Yumi in the garden, sharing lunch from the lacquered box she had brought along. Yumi reacted to her news with enthusiasm, speaking excitedly of all the preparations that must be made in order to welcome a new child into a home. At the same time, though, Reiko thought she felt an undercurrent of misgiving from her sister.

Of course Yumi had suspected early on the true reason for the journey to Seoul. In many ways, Reiko's younger sister was much more worldly. Still, Yumi would never rebuke her, or ever say anything to bring down her hopes. About Tetsuo she had only this to say:

"When our family first met him, Father and the rest of us thought you might face problems from Tetsuo's unconventionality, his Western, liberal

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ideas. He has certainly been a surprise, then. Whoever would have expected, so few years later, that your husband would try so very hard to be perfectly Japanese?"

Reiko blinked. Is that what Tetsuo is trying to do? She wondered. But no encouragement would force Yumi to say anything more.

7.

THE NEXT trip to Seoul was even briefer than the first, and taken on even shorter notice. Reiko barely had time to pack a satchel for Yukiko and deliver her to Yumi before they had to rush to the airport to catch the flight Tetsuo had arranged.

Again, the Pak Clinic doctors took samples just beyond the curtain of modesty. Reiko was well enough educated to understand much of what she overheard them saying.

They spoke of tests . . . tests for potential genetic defects, for recessive color blindness, for the insidious trait of nearsightedness, for the correct sex chromosomes. When the implications of their discussions sank in, Reiko's knees shook.

They were holding court on whether the fetus — still so small that Reiko wasn't even showing yet — was to live or die.

She'd heard that in parts of rural China, they were drowning girl babies. Here, though, they were tested, discovered, and taken from the *womb*, before their first cry. Before their spirits could even form.

Reiko was terrified they were about to tell her the fetus carried some unpalatable defect, such as femininity. So when they returned and bowed, smiling, with good news, Reiko nearly fainted with relief. The very real attentiveness Tetsuo showed her afterward caused her to feel as if she had achieved some fine accomplishment, and had made him very proud of her.

They held hands during the flight home. And for the following four wonderful months, Reiko thought her trials were at an end.

Now Tetsuo often came home early, spurning all but the most important business-and-dinner parties with colleagues. He played with Yukiko and laughed with his family. He and Reiko spoke together of plans for their son, how he would get the finest of everything, the best attention, the best schooling, everything required to arm him for success in a competitive, judgmental world.

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His son's fate, Tetsuo swore, would not be to face an endless subservience to subtle hierarchies and status. He would not be one of those who were bullied in school, in cruel rituals of *kumi* group solidarity, by children and teachers alike. His son would *head* hierarchies. When his son toasted *kampai,* it would be *his* glass that would be highest.

Touching her swelling belly, Tetsuo's eyes seemed to shine, making Reiko feel it all had been worthwhile after all.

Then, in her fourth month, Tetsuo came home with yet another slim white folder containing two red-and-green airline boarding passes.

8.

SHE GASPED in surprise when she saw the image on the screen. The Pak Clinic doctors focused beams of ultrasound into her womb, and computers sorted the muddled reflections into a stunning image of the life growing within her.

"It looks like a monkey!" she cried in dismay. Her thoughts whirled, for surely this was something the doctors would never allow!

One of the men laughed harshly. The other doctor was kinder. He explained: "At this stage of development, the fetus has many of the attributes of our distant ancestors, who lived in the sea long ago. Only recently, for instance, it had gills and a tail. But these were reabsorbed. And in time he will look like later forefathers, until he at last appears quite human."

Reiko sighed in relief. Someone mentioned the *gaijin*-sounding technical term "recapitulation," and suddenly she did remember having heard or read something about it sometime. She blushed, shamefaced, certain her outburst had made them think her a hysterical woman.

"The important thing we have determined," the doctor went on, "is that the acoustic nerves are already in place, and soon the eyes will be functional."

"So all is well now?" she asked. "My baby is healthy?"

"A fine, strong little boy, your Minoru will be."

"Then I can go home now?"

The second doctor shook his head. "First we will be fulfilling the next phase of our contract. We must install a very special device. Do not be alarmed. We are very skilled at this. It will not cause much dis-

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comfort. You will have to stay for two nights."

Dazed, Reiko did not even think of complaining as they gave her an injection. With sudden drowsiness swarming over her, she watched the world swim as they wheeled her into an operating room. There was hushed, professional talk. Nobody spoke to her.

"S'karaimas. Gomen nasai," she said as the anesthetist's mask came down and a sweet, cloying odor filled her mouth and throat. "Forgive me, I am very tired."

Reiko's shattered thoughts orbited a burning core of shame. She seemed to have forgotten the reason she was apologizing, but whatever she had done, Reiko knew it had to have been terrible.

9.

DREAMS BEGAN disturbing her sleep soon after her third homecoming. They started out as muddy, uncertain feelings of depression and fear, which did not rouse her but left her tired in the morning when it came time to prepare Tetsuo for work and Yukiko for preschool. Often she would collapse back upon the tatami after they were gone. She had no energy. This pregnancy seemed to be taking much more out of her than the first one.

Then there was the music. There was no escaping the music.

At first it had been rather pleasant. The tiny machine that had been implanted into her womb could barely be traced with her fingertips. Nothing extruded. It drew power from small batteries that would easily last another five months.

And at this stage in the fetus's development, all the device ever did was play it music. Endlessly, over and over again, music.

"Minoru wa, gakusei desu," Tetsuo said. "Little Minoru is now a student. Of course his brain is not yet advanced enough to accept more complex lessons, but he can learn music even this early. He will emerge with perfect pitch, knowing his scales already, as if by instinct."

Tetsuo smiled. *"Minoru kun wa on'gaku ga suki deshoo."*

So the harmonies repeated, over and over again, throbbing like sonar within the confined sea of her insides, diffracting around and through her organs, resonating at last with the beating of her heart.

Yumi no longer visited when she thought Tetsuo might be at home.

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Their father had voice his disgusted disapproval of Tetsuo and this invasion against the ways of nature. Reiko had been forced to answer loyally in Tetsuo's defense.

"You are too Westernized," she told them, borrowing her husband's own words. "You too blindly accept the *gaijin* and their alien concepts about nature and guilt. There is no shame in this thing we are doing."

"A dubious distinction," her father had replied irritably. Yumi then interjected, "*Guilt* consists in doing the right thing, even when nobody is watching, Reiko. *Shame* is making sure you don't get caught doing what others disapprove."

"Well?" Reiko had answered. "You two are the only ones expressing disapproval. All of Tetsuo's associates and friends admire him for this! My neighbors come by to listen to the music!"

Her sister and father had looked at each other at that moment, as if she had just proven their point. But Reiko did not understand. All she knew for certain was that she must side with her husband. No other choice was even conceivable. Yumi might be able to have a more "modern" marriage, but to Reiko, such ways seemed to promise only chaos.

"We plan to give our son the best advantages," she concluded in the end. And to that, of course, there was very little the others could reply. "We shall see," her father had concluded. Then he changed the subject to the color of the autumn leaves.

10.

AT THE end of Reiko's sixth month, the thing in her womb spoke its first words.

She sat up quickly in the dark, clutching the covers. In a brief moment of terror, Reiko thought that it had been a ghost, or the baby himself, mumbling dire premonitions from deep inside her. The words were indistinct, but she could feel them vibrating under her trembling fingertips.

It took a few moments to realize that it was the machine once again, now moving into a new phase of fetal education. Reiko sank back against the pillows with a sigh. Next to her, Tetsuo snored quietly, contentedly, unaware of this milestone.

Reiko lay listening. She couldn't make out what the machine was

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enunciating slowly, repetitiously. But the baby *responded* with faint movements. She wondered if he were reaching out toward the tiny speaker. Or perhaps, instead, he was trying to get away. If so, then he was trapped, trapped in the closest, most secure prison of them all.

The doctors were certain it was safe, Reiko reminded herself. Surely those wise men would not do anything to hurt her child. Anyway, though it was a pioneering method, she and Tetsuo were not the very first. There had been a few before them, to prove it was all right.

Consoled, but convinced that sleep would not return, she rose to begin yet another day before the sun turned the eastern sky a dull and smoggy gray. Reiko bent her attention to daily life, to chores and preparations, to doing what she could to make life pleasant for her family.

One evening soon thereafter, they sat together, watching a television program about genetic engineering. The reporters spoke glowingly of how, in future years, scientists would be able to cut and splice and redesign the very code of life itself. Human beings would specify everything about their plants, their animals, even their offspring, making them stronger, brighter, better than ever.

She heard Tetsuo sigh in envy, so Reiko said nothing. She only laid her head on his shoulder and concealed her own relieved thoughts.

By that time I will have finished my own childbearing years. Those wonders will be for other women to deal with.

Reiko knew what was coming next. She tried and tried to prepare herself, but still it came as a shock when, a week or so later, her belly began to glow. At night, with the house lights extinguished, faint shimmerings of color could be seen emerging through her flesh from one corner of her burgeoning belly. It flickered like a tiny flame, but there was no added warmth. Rather, it was a cold light.

Soon the neighbor women were back, curious and insistent on seeing for themselves. They murmured admiringly at the luminance given her skin by the tiny crystal display, and treated Reiko with such respect that she dared not chase them away, as she might have preferred.

A few of Tetsuo's envious comrades even persuaded him to bring them home to see, as well. One day, Reiko had to rush about preparing a very special meal for Tetsuo's supervisor's supervisor. The great man complimented her cooking and spoke highly of Tetsuo's drive and forward thinking.

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Reiko did not much mind showing a small patch of skin in a dim room, nor the cold touch of the stethoscope as others listened in on Minoru's lessons. Modesty was nothing against the pride she felt in helping Tetsuo.

Still, she did wonder about the baby. What was the machine showing him, deep inside her? Was he already learning about faraway lands Reiko herself had never seen? Was the machine describing the biological facts of life to Minoru? Where he was and what was happening to him?

Or was it imprinting upon him the cool, graceful forms of mathematics, fashioning genius while the brain was still as malleable as new bread dough?

Her father explained some of it to her during Reiko's next-to-last visit to her parents' home. While Yumi and their mother cleared the dinner bowls, Professor Sato looked over some of the titles of the programs listed on the Pak Clinic brochure.

"'Abstract Geometry and Topology,' 'Musical Tone Recognition,' 'Basic Linguistic Grammar' . . . *Hon ga nan'satsu arimas'ka*? Hmmm." Her father put aside the brochure and tried to explain to her.

"Of course the fetus cannot learn things that an infant could not. It cannot really understand speech, for instance. It doesn't know yet about people or the world. The technicians apparently know better than to try to cram facts into the poor little thing.

"No, what they appear after is the laying down of tracks, pathways, *essences* . . . to set up the foundations for talents the child will later fill with knowledge during his schooling." Reluctantly, her father admitted that the doctors seemed to have thought these things out. "They are very clever," he said.

With a sigh, he added: "That does not necessarily mean, of course, that they really know what they are doing. They may be too clever by half."

A warning glare from Yumi shut him up then. But not before Reiko shivered at the tone in his voice.

Soon she started avoiding her father, and even Yumi. The days dragged on as the weight she carried grew ever heavier. The fetus stirred much less now. She had a feeling he was paying very close attention to his lessons.

* * *

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11.

PAK CLINIC technicians visited their house. They examined her with instruments, some familiar and others very strange. At one point they pressed a unit to her skin very near the embedded machine and read its memory. They consulted excitedly, then packed up their tools. Only as an afterthought, one of them told Reiko her son was developing nicely. In fact, he was quite a specimen.

Tetsuo came home and told her that there was something new and exciting the Pak people wanted to try.

"A few fetuses, such as our son, have responded very well indeed to the lessons. Now there is something that may make all he has accomplished so far seem as nothing!"

Reiko touched his arm. "Tetsuo, it is so very near the time he will be born. Only another month or so. Why push little Minoru every minute?" She smiled tentatively, making an unusual effort to contact his eyes. "After all," she pleaded, "students on the outside get occasional vacations. Can he not, as well?"

Tetsuo did not seem to hear her. His excitement was fiercely intense. "They have discovered something truly fantastic recently, Mother. Some babies actually seem to be telepathic during the final weeks before birth!"

"*Te . . . te-re-paturu!*" Reiko mouthed the *gairaigo* word.

"But it is extremely close-range in effect. Even mothers usually detect it only as a vague strengthening of their mother-and-child bond. And anyway, the trauma of being born always ends it. Even the most gentle of cesarean deliveries. . . ."

He was rambling. Reiko lowered her eyes in defeat, knowing how impossible it would be to penetrate past the heat of his enthusiasm. Tetsuo had not changed, she realized at last. He was still the impetuous boy she had married. Still as reckless as a *zoku*. Only, now he knew better than to express it in unpopular Western eccentricities. He would choose acceptable Eastern ones instead.

When the technicians came the next day, she let them work without her asking them any questions. They gave her a girdle of finely woven mesh to wear over her womb. After they left, she simply lay there and turned her head to the wall.

Yumi telephoned, but Reiko would not see her. Her parents she put

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off, claiming fatigue. Little Yukiko, sensitive as always, was told that ladies get moody late in pregnancy. She did her homework quietly and played with her computer tutor alone in her tiny room.

Tetsuo was promoted. The celebration with his comrades lasted late. When he returned home, smelling of fish, sake, and bar girls, Reiko pretended to be asleep. Actually, though, she was listening. The machine scarcely lit up anymore. It hardly made a sound. Still, she felt she could almost follow its conversations with her son.

Shapes filled her half-dreams . . . impossible shapes, bottles with two openings, and none. Again and again there came one particular word, "topology."

Over the following days, she tried to regain some enthusiasm. There were times when she felt as she had when she had carried Yukiko . . . a communion with her child that ran deeper, stronger than anything the machines could tap. During such moments, Reiko almost felt happy.

Year End came, and most of the husbands were out all week, weaving and bobbing in *bonenkai* celebrations, when so many tried to obliterate the old year in a wash of alcohol. The sake-dispensing vending machines at the train stations emptied faster than the drink companies could restock them. Wise women and children kept off the streets.

One night, Tetsuo returned home drunk and ranted long about her father, knowing full well that by tradition he would not be held accountable for anything he said in this state. Nevertheless, Reiko moved her tatami into Yukiko's room. She lay there quietly, thinking about something her father had said to her once.

"Both Tetsuo and I believe in a melding of East and West," he had told Reiko. "Many people on both sides of the Pacific want to see this cojoining of strengths. But there is a disagreement over how strength should be defined, Reiko.

"Tetsuo's kind see only the power of Western scientific reductionism. They wish to combine it with our discipline, our traditional methods of competitive conformity. With this I fundamentally disagree.

"What the West really has to offer — the only thing it has to offer, my child — is honesty. Somehow, in the midst of their horrid history, the best among the *gaijin* learned a wonderful lesson. They learned to distrust themselves, to doubt even what they were taught to believe or what their egos make them yearn to see. To know that even truth must be scruti-

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nized. it was a great discovery, almost as great as the treasure we of the East have to offer them in return, the gift of harmony."

Reiko had not understood, either then or now. But Yumi had seemed to comprehend. "It is not a question, then, of whether East or West shall win, is it, Father?"

"No," he had said. "There will definitely be a synthesis. The only question remaining is what type of synthesis it shall be. Will it be one of power? Or one of wisdom?"

The next day, Tetsuo apologized without words. Reiko forgave him and moved back into their bedroom.

Technicians visited them twice a week now. Reiko wondered how they would ever pay for such attention, until Tetsuo told her that the clinic was refunding all costs. They were special. They would make this process famous throughout the world.

At times, Reiko worried that the baby would not even be recognizable when he emerged. Would he wear an expression of sage wisdom from the very start, and stare into space thinking great thoughts? Would he spill from the womb already full forged into that intimidating, imperious creature, an adult male? Would he even need her love?

Hope also came and went in tempo with those waves of feeling deep within her. Every peak and trough of emotion left her confused and drained. She was glad that it would all be over soon.

Reiko met the other wives in the special group. Some of them were knowledgeable, more confident than she. Mrs. Sukimura, in particular, seemed so relaxed and assured. She was the furthest along. Already the Pak techs were ecstatic with the results from her child. They spoke of data-transfer rates, of frequency and phase filtering, of Fourier transforms and pattern recognition.

At one point, all of the women were picked up by limousines and taken downtown to MITI, the all-powerful Ministry of International Trade and Industry, on Sakurada-Dor Avenue. In a great hall, technicians attached mesh girdles and gently, tenderly wheeled them close to mammoth, chilled machines.

Computers, Reiko thought. They were using powerful computers to *talk* to the fetuses!

When the minister himself appeared, Reiko blinked in astonishment. His Eminence shook Tetsuo's hand. Reiko felt faint.

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12.

THEY WERE pledged to secrecy, of course. If the *gaijin* newspapers got hold of this too soon, there would be hell to pay. Worldwide media attention before the right preparations had been made would shame the nation, even though it was really none of the business of outsiders.

Others were already jealous of Japan in so many ways. And Westerners tended to insist that theirs was the only morality. So Tetsuo and Reiko signed their chops to a document. There was talk of a leave of absence from Tetsuo's company, and an important post when he returned. He spoke to her of buying a larger house in a better neighborhood.

"One of the problems has been in the field of *software*," he explained one evening, though Reiko knew he was talking mostly to himself. "Our engineers have been very clever in practical technology, leaving most of the world far behind in many areas. But computer programming has turned out to be very hard. There seems to be no conventional way of catching up with the Americans there. Your father used to claim that it had to do with our system of education."

Tetsuo laughed derisively. "Japanese education is the finest in all the world. The toughest. The most demanding!"

"What. . . . ?" she asked. "What does this have to do with the babies?"

"They are geniuses at programming!" Tetsuo cried. "Already they have cracked problems that had stymied hundreds of our best software designers. Of course they do not understand what they are doing, but that does not seem to matter. It is all a matter of asking questions in just the right ways, and letting them innovate.

"For instance, the unborn have yet no concept of distance or motion. But that turns out to be an advantage, you see, for they have no preconceptions. They bring fresh insight, without being burdened by our worldly assumptions.

"So one of our young engineers solved a vexing problem for the Ministry of Trade, while another has developed an entirely new model of traffic control that should reduce downtown congestion by 5 percent!"

Tetsuo's eyes held a glow, a wild flicker that gave Reiko a chill. "*Zuibun joozo desu, ne!*" he said in admiration of that accomplishment by an unborn child. "As for our son," Tetsuo went on. "He is being asked even

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more challenging questions about transportation systems. And I am certain he will make us proud."

So, Reiko thought. It was even worse than she had imagined. This was more than *juku*, more than just another form of cram-education. Her child was being put to work before he was born. And there was nothing at all she could do about it.

Guiltily, Reiko wasn't even sure she should try.

13.

A KLEIN BOTTLE . . . she knew the name in a dream.

It was what one called that bizarre thing — a container with two openings and none at all . . . whose inside was its outside.

14.

WHEN MRS. Sukimura's time came, they knew of it only by the fact that the woman did not join the others at the computer center. Ah well, Reiko thought. At least the respite was coming soon.

Traditionally, childbirth in Japan was done by appointment, during business hours. A woman scheduled a day with her obstetrician, when she would check into the hospital and receive the drugs to induce labor. It was all very civilized, and much more predictable than the way it apparently was done in the West.

But for the women of the test group, matters were different. So important was the work the fetuses were doing that it was decided to wait as long as possible, to let the babies come as late as they wanted.

The reason given was "birth trauma." Apparently, emerging into the outer world robbed even the most talented fetuses of their small but potent psychic powers. After that they would lapse to being babies again., Talented, well-tutored babies, but babies nonetheless.

The MITI technicians regretted this, but it would certainly be no "trauma" to her. To Reiko, this coming return to ignorance would be a gift from the blessed Buddha himself.

Oh, it would be strange to have a genius son. But they had promised her

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that he would still be a little boy. She would tickle him and make him laugh. She would hold him when he tripped and cried. She would bathe in his sweet smile, and he would love her. She would see to that.

Genius did not have to mean soullessness. She knew that from having met a few of her father's students over the years. There had been one boy . . . her father had wanted Reiko to go out with him instead of Tetsuo, years ago. Everyone said he was brilliant, and he had a nice smile and personality.

If only he had not also had the habit of eating red meat too often. It made him smell bad, like an American.

And anyway, by then she had already fallen in love with Tetsuo.

One by one the other women dropped out of their group, to be replaced by newcomers who looked to Reiko now for advice and reassurance. Her own time would be very soon, of course. In fact, she was already more than a week overdue when she went to the hospital for another examination, and one of the doctors left his clipboard on the counter when he went to answer a telephone call.

Reiko suddenly felt daring. She reached out and turned the clipboard, hoping to see her own chart. But it was only a list of patients on the doctor's other ward.

Then she frowned. Mrs. Sukimura's name was on the list! Three weeks after her delivery, which they'd been told had been uneventful.

Reiko recognized other names. In fact, nearly all of the women who had gone into labor before her were under care on the next floor.

The baby churned in response to her racing heart. Footsteps told of the doctor's return, so Reiko put back the clipboard and sat down again with an effort to remain outwardly calm.

"If you don't begin labor by the end of the month, we will induce it," he told her upon completing his tests. "The delay was approved by your husband, of course. There is nothing to worry about."

Reiko barely heard his words. What concerned her was the plan beginning to form in her mind. For her, it would call for daring to the point of recklessness.

Fortunately, she had worn Western dress for her visit to the hospital. A kimono would have been too conspicuous. At first she had considered trying to borrow a doctor's white coat to wear over her street clothes. After all, there were some female physicians here. She had seen a few.

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But her protruding belly and slow waddle would have made the imposture absurd, even if she did encounter a white coat just lying around to be taken.

She did still have the gray gown they had given her to wear during the examination. This she kept balled inside her purse. In the ladies' room, she put the loose garment on over her street clothes. People tended to look right past patients in a ward. The uniform was a partial cloak of invisibility.

First she tried the lifts. But the elevator operator looked at her when she asked to be taken to floor eight. "May I please see your pass?" the young woman asked Reiko politely.

"I misspoke; forgive me," Reiko said, bowing to hide her fluster. "I meant to say floor nine."

On exiting the lift, she rested against the wall for a while to catch her breath. The extra weight she carried every moment of every hour was a burden on her overstrained back, sheer torture if she did not maintain just the right erect posture. Soon it would be time to spill her child into the world. And yet, she was beginning to dread the idea with a sick, mortal fear.

A nurse asked if she needed help.

"Iie, Kekko desu," Reiko answered quickly. *"Gomen nasai. Ikimashoo."*

Giving her a doubtful glance, the nurse turned quickly away. Reiko waddled slowly toward the clearly marked fire exit, looked around to make sure she wasn't being observed, and pushed her way into the stairwell.

Her shoes made soft scraping sounds on the rough, high-traction surface of the steps. Under her left hand, her womb was a center of furious activity as the baby kicked and turned. By the time she reached the eighth-floor landing, the guard stationed there had already risen from his little stool.

"May I help you?" he asked perplexedly.

Certainly, honorable sir, Reiko thought sarcastically. Please be so kind as to open the door for me, and then forget that I ever came this way.

The guard frowned. Twice he began to speak, then stopped. His confused expression was soon matched by Reiko's own amazement as he blinked several times, then reached back to turn the knob and pull the portal aside for her.

"Doozo . . . ohairi kudasai. . . ."

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"*Ee, itachakimasu,*" Reiko answered breathlessly. She rocked through the opening in a daze until the door was closed behind her again. Then she sagged back and sighed.

For a few moments, there in the stairwell, she had felt something *fey* radiating from her womb. Her child had reached out in her time of need, and *helped* Reiko . . . probably without having any idea exactly what he was doing. He had helped her because of her deeply felt need.

Love. She had always believed it had power transcending all the cold metal tools men were so proud of. All the more so the love between a mother and her child.

I must find out what is going on here, she knew. I must.

Fortunately, security in the hospital seemed to have only one layer, as if the owners of this place expected a mere ribbon of courtesy to suffice. And under normal circumstances, it would have been more than enough.

Reiko did not have to show great agility, or dodge quickly from room to room. The halls were nearly empty, and the few people on duty at the nurses' station were turned away in a technical discussion as she hurried out of sight.

She came to a large window facing the hallway. Within were the familiar shapes of a neonatal unit — rows of tiny white cots, monitoring instruments, a bored male nurse reading a newspaper.

Babies.

They look healthy enough, she thought, nurturing a slender shoot of a smile. There appeared to be no monsters here, just pink newborn little boys, each of them looking very much like a tiny, chubby Buddha . . . or that English prime minister, Churchill.

Reiko's nascent smile faded, however, when she realized that the children were moving hardly at all. And then she saw that every one of them was connected by taped electrodes to a cluster of cables. The cables led to a bank of tall machines by the far wall.

Computers. And the babies, staring with open eyes, hardly moved at all.

"*Wakarimasen,*" Reiko moaned, shaking her head. "I don't understand!"

* * *

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15.

THE PLATE by the door read "Sukimura." Reiko listened and, hearing no voices, slipped inside.

"Reiko-san!"

The woman in the chair looked healthy, fully recovered. She stood up and hurried over to take Reiko's hand. "Reiko-san, what are you doing here? They told us—"

"Us? They have all the others? Will they keep me here, too, when my time comes?"

Mrs. Sukimura nodded and looked away. "They are kind. We . . . we are allowed to nurse our babies while they work."

"*Work.*" Reiko measured the word. "But the birth trauma . . . it should return the children to innocence! They promised. . . ."

"They found a technique to *prevent* it, Reiko-san. Our babies were all born wise. They are *engineers*, doing great work for the good of the realm. It is even said that the palace may take notice, it is so important."

Reiko was aghast. "Do they plan to leave them hooked up to wires forever?"

"Oh no, no. The doctors say this will not harm our sons. They say they will still be all right." And yet, a hollow tone in her voice betrayed Mrs. Sukimura's true feelings.

"But then, Izumi-san," Reiko said, "what is wrong?"

"They are mistaken!" The older woman cried. "The men say we are silly, superstitious women. They say that the babies are all well, healthy . . . that they will lead normal lives. But oh, Reiko-san, they have no *kami!* They have no souls!"

Reiko blinked, and the spirit within her writhed in tempo to her sudden breath. No, it cannot be true, she thought. I feel my baby's kami. For all he has been through, he is still human!

Footsteps echoed in the hallway. Voices approached the door.

"At birth," Mrs. Sukimura said in a husky voice filled with horrible resignation. "At birth they . . . their souls were sucked away into . . . into *software.*"

The door opened. Reiko heard rough masculine tones. Felt hands upon her shoulders. She cried out. "*Iye. Iye!*" But she could not shrug them off. The hands pulled her from the room.

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"Reiko-san!" She heard her friend call just before the door shut with a final click. A gurney waited. Strong hands. A needle.

Reiko wailed, but no physical resistance could overcome the insistence of those hands.

16.

THE FLUTTERINGS caused by inducement drugs soon became tremors, which turned into fierce contractions. Reiko cried out for Tetsuo, knowing full well that tradition would have kept him away, even if frowning officials from the ministry did not. Spasms came with increasing rapidity now, sending the small life within her kicking and swimming in agitation.

New drugs were injected. Machines focused upon her womb, and she knew that these were the clever devices designed to prevent the cleansing fall of innocence that the doctors hatefully called "birth trauma." They were adamant about preventing it now. They were insisting that her baby enter the world wise.

Oh, how they would discover, to their regret, what they had really done, what they had unleashed. But even were she able to speak, she knew they would not listen. They would have to find out for themselves.

In her delirium, Reiko's head turned left and right, trying to track voices nobody else in the operating room seemed to hear. They came at her from all sides, whispering through the hissing aspirators, humming from the lamps, murmuring from the electric sockets.

Spirits leered and taunted her from the machines, some mere patternings of light and static, others more complex — coursing in involute electronic dissonance within the microprocessors. Ghosts floated around her — whispering kami, dressed up in raiments of software.

How foolish of men to think they can banish the world of spirits. Reiko knew with sudden certainty that the very idea was arrogant. Of course the kami would simply adapt to whatever forms the times demanded. The spirits would find a way.

They were loose in the grid now, biding their time. And they would have revenge.

Ghosts of baby hamsters . . . of baby human beings. . . .

She sensed her own son, thinking now, desperately, harder than any

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fetus had ever been forced to think before.

Soporific numbness spread over her as the tentacle-like hands turned to other violations. The shuddering contractions made vision blur. Superimposed upon her diffracting tears were dazzling moiré patterns and Möbius chains. How she knew the names of these things, without ever having learned them, Reiko did not bother to wonder. From her mouth came words. . . . "Transportation . . . locational translation of coordinates. . . ," she whispered, licking her dry lips. ". . . nonlinear transformations. . . ."

And then there was the bottle that had not one opening but two . . . or none at all . . . the container whose inside was *outside.*

Now Reiko found herself wondering what the word "outside" really meant.

The hands did not seem to notice or care about the ghostly forms glaring down at her from the harsh fluorescents. Those angry spirits mocked her agony, as they mocked the other one, the one struggling with a problem in geometry.

Another spasm of savage pressure struck Reiko, almost doubling her over. And she felt overwhelmed by a sudden swimming sensation within her . . . an intensifying sense of dread . . . desperate concentration on a single task, to turn theoretical knowledge into practical skill.

The kami in the walls and in the machines chittered derisively. The problem was too difficult! It would never be solved in time!

A container whose inside is outside. . . .

"*Desu ka ne!*" one of the technicians said, shaking and tapping his monitoring headphones. He shouted again, this time in alarm.

Suddenly white coats flapped on all sides. There was no time for full anesthesia, so they sprayed on locals that numbed with bone-chilling rapidity. Nobody even bothered to set up a modesty screen as the obstetric surgeons began an emergency cesarean section.

Reiko felt it happen then, suddenly, as a burst of pure light seemed to explode within her! For that moment she shared an overwhelming sense of wonder and elation — the joy and beauty of pure mathematics. It was the only language possible in that narrow instant of triumph. And yet it also carried love.

The surgeon cut. There came a loud pop, as if a balloon had suddenly burst. Her distended belly collapsed abruptly, like a tent all at once deprived of its supports.

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The technicians stared, blinking. Trembling, the stunned surgeon reached in. Reiko felt him grope under the flaccid layers of her empty womb, seeking in bewilderment what was no longer there.

Applied Topology. She remembered the name of a text, one of the courses they had given her son, and Reiko knew it stood for shapes and their relationships. It had to do with *space* and *time,* and it could be applied to problems in transportation.

The hands did more things to her, but they could not harm her anymore. Reiko ignored them.

"He has escaped you," she told them softly, and the angry, envious, mad kami as well. "He learned his lessons well, and has made his mother proud."

Frustrated voices filled the room, rebounding off the walls. But Reiko had already followed her heart, beyond the constraints of any chamber or any nation, far beyond the knowledge of living men, where there were no obstacles to love.

"I just love the pitter-patter on the roof. Don't you!"

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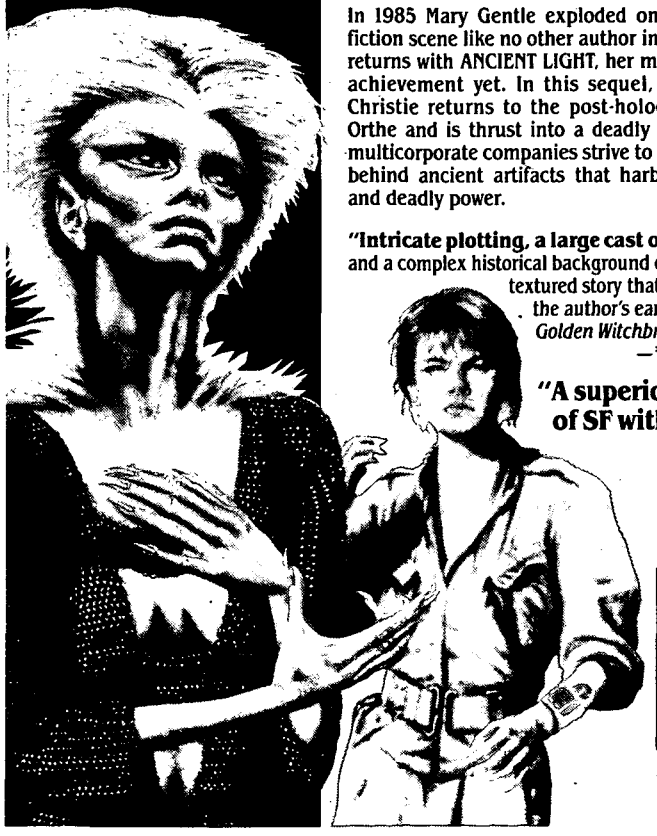
"Spellbinding... the alien world comes to life as the planet Dune did."*



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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Weapon, Robert Mason, Charter, $4.50

In Another Country, Robert Silverberg and *Vintage Season,* C.L. Moore, Tor, $3.50

WHILE I didn't swear to you I wouldn't do it again, I certain had no intention of doing so. But there it is — Man proposes; and God disposes. What I mean to say is, *Weapon* was sharply reflected in a story of my own, and thus we have two months running in which that — or something like that — is true.

Whereas *The City, Not Long After,* is mirror-imaged in my own *Some Will Not Die,* however, the parallel between Robert Mason's book and my *Astounding* story, "First To Serve," is exact. Both have to do with a robotic soldier, and both make exactly the same points. Mine came out in 1955 or so . . . it doesn't matter exactly when . . . and Mason's came out some 35 years later. Am I miffed? Not hardly — Mason's is a cracking good story, told over a much larger compass, and it delivered, in spades, what I originally picked up the book for; that is, entertainment.

But there is more to it than that, as it turns out, and so this review.

Solo, Mason's protagonist, is no lurching automaton; he is a deft, deadly, smoothly functioning organism, for all that he eats electricity instead of food. But he was not always so. When he was born, in the laboratories of Electron Dynamics, he couldn't even walk. In fact, it was a comparatively long time before he learned to recognize letters. And the reason is that, according to the latest real thinking in the real world, there is no way but essentially a duplicate of the human learning process to get a machine to perform human work.

Oh, you can *program* a robot to perform any one of a number of tasks, but that is a dead end. If you want a machine that will instantly respond to the infinite number of inputs to which a human would

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react, you have to teach it like a human. (Of course, it has to be built accordingly, sharply distinguished from the usual "computer" model.)

Oddly enough, according to Mason in a postscript which is both convincing and chilling, this has already been done, to a limited extent, and it can readily be forseen that it will be done to the full extent soon. He gives a reading list: Max Delbruck, Howard Gardner, three books by Douglas Hofstadter, two by Marvin Minsky, and the like. It is a little difficult to tell where Mason the wordsmith leaves off and Mason the concerned citizen begins; probably, a little farther up the spectrum than at first is evident. But, still ....

Well, to the book at hand, which is told largely from Solo's viewpoint, and of course is all fiction.

Solo is the first of his kind, and although there is another one building in the laboratories of Electron Dynamics, Solo is the only one who is out in the world, so to speak. How he got out in the world is interesting. His builder, Bill Stewart, was against it — particularly since Solo killed his first trainer, most people agree accidentally. Stewart is convinced Solo is a failure, and an inescapable one. You don't have much of a soldier unless you build in emotions, and the minute you build in emotions, you lose control. So Stewart, although he is the machine's builder, is ready to give up the experiment. Not so the Army, as personified by General Clyde Haynes.

Haynes is the usual type one would expect. He thinks with his gonads, if he thinks at all, and thus he doesn't think well. Well, in the end he reveals unexpected depths, of a sort, but for 99% of this book he is what he seems to be. What he is is (A) in charge of the project, and (B) gung ho to have Solo out on a real mission. So they are in Costa Rica, hard by the Nicaraguan border, and as soon as Haynes can arrange it, Solo is going to get a crack at some real Sandinistas. Meanwhile, Solo is being told such things as the U.S. won the Vietnam war.

Stewart is with Haynes and Solo, and the troupe of various spear-carrying U.S. troops who are training Solo and lending their services in various ways. For instance, there is Mr. Thompson, the helicopter pilot.

Solo is a man-shaped figure, somewhat large but not inordinately so. He is made of composite materials, including Kevlar for an outside coating, which makes him bulletproof against hand-held weapons. His face is the part that looks least like a man, because his "skull" is just a housing for various vision systems — his brain is in his chest, that not needing heart or lungs or

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intestines. And he weighs about 300 lbs, whereas a man the same size would weigh about 150.*

Now Solo is stocked with 'frames" — that is, the operating manuals of, for instance, all sorts of flying machines, U.S. and Soviet, fixed wing and not — and he could, given fairly crude materials, build several aircraft. Given the right materials, he could build any of them. Similarly, he is a truck mechanic. But it does take him some time to learn how to fly a helicopter, for instance. About ten hours, as distinguished from a human's hundreds. That is because although they can insert "frames" in him until he bursts, the processes by which he learns are as mysterious as those of a human.

This point is made again and again. The military — well, General Haynes — expect that somehow, Solo can be made to do anything. And he probably can, to his design limits, but it is a very real mistake to assume that because he is a machine he is fully understandable to the humans that built him. They started him going, after filling his chest with specialized hardware; now the hardware has taken over, and while the humans could cripple him at any time — in the beginning of the book — they wouldn't be able to predict *how* they'd cripple him, and they couldn't be sure he wouldn't swiftly learn a path around the excision. In fact, he would. Solo is a highly complex organism; an Artifical Intelligence which is not understandable to humans except in the crudest analogy, and which, while not concerned with some things human — gonads, for instance — shares this planet with us and is therefore shaped in response to many of the same stimuli. Which is not to say he is shaped the same.

Well, General Haynes gets his wish, sort of. Solo does an excellent job of landing an out-of-fuel helicopter, and sets out in the jungle. But for one thing, he seems to be in sympathy with the Sandinistas.

In fact, the bulk of the book is taken up with this. He is befriended by a boy in a Sandinistas village, and step by step he becomes enmeshed in the simple *campesino* way of life. He repairs a truck, for instance. He befriends a number of villagers. He kills thirty-five members of a Contra patrol. He designs and builds a simple but effective generator that enables him to move around freely, without recourse to the Honda generator owned by the village. And so forth.

I don't see why. But I did the same thing in my story. It just isn't credible that a machine wouldn't weigh more than a man, I guess. But the fact is, it's at least debateable.

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Eventually, his path intersects that of Robert Warren, CIA specialist. Robert Warren and a crew of supporting specialists have been flown in to attempt to get Solo back. They're not sure precisely where he is, at first, because Solo doesn't use his satellite uplinks. Eventually they do become sure, and eventually it all comes to a head, and Solo — but you don't care about that. Oh? You do? Well, that's the entertainment part, and I suggest you buy a copy and go to it.

Probably the most interesting part of the book concerns itself with how the love of the villagers for him, which is increasingly real, is returned by Solo. It is clear at the beginning of their relationship that he does things for them strictly from enlightened self-interest . . . or nearly so. When he kills the fer-de-lance, at the beginning of his interaction with the village, it is clearly self-interest; the only question is whether he might not have chosen another branch of the decision tree. But a curious thing happens as the number and complexity of the relationships with the villagers grows; Solo begins to do things which are less and less clear.

For instance, in the same episode in which he kills a parcel of Contra raiders, Agela, a girl of the village, is raped, and her brother, Eusebio, and a friend, Inginio, are kidnapped by the retreating Contra survivors. Now, there is nothing much apparently in it for Solo to go after the Contras, rescue the boys, and counter-kidnap the two Contras who raped Agela. Eusebio and Virgilio, while nice, and the two villagers with whom Solo first had contact, are not essentially different from the other villagers. Certainly Solo can't un-rape Agela. And the Contras *are* in retreat; the threat is over. But Eusebio is apparently the only surviving relative of Agela, and apparently Solo feels that if he is not brought back, Agela will be worse off than if he is, and if Agela is worse off the village suffers to some extent, and Solo depends on the village at this juncture, and therefore. . . .

Well, the upshot is that Agela, who was already disposed to love him, now definitely does. And the question is: Does Solo love her?

You understand me, this question is seriously posed and seriously answered. While this is superficially just a techno-military thriller, it is written with uncommon care, and transcends the genre, as they say.

The answer is that he does. In his own way, not being driven by glandular secretions but purely as a matter of fact, he feels something for Agela which is different from what he feels for any of the other villagers. I don't, obviously, know what to call it; neither does anybody

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else. But for want of a better word, love.

And I believe it. Given this sort of organism, growing bit by bit — though at a rapidly accelerating rate — Solo is going to have to deal with that situation sooner or later.

Which is not to say he doesn't feel special affection for Eusebio, too; or for Alonzo Rivas, in the event that precipitates Solo's final action. But for Agela he feels love, and I believe it.

Curious. Very curious.

Many years ago — 1946 — *Astounding* published "Vintage Season," by Lawrence O'Donnell. Anybody who cared at all understood that this was a pen name for C.L. Moore and Henry Kuttner, and that *this* pen-name was largely C.L. Moore, unlike "Lewis Padgett" or any of the others the duo used.

C.L. Moore was the dark-eyed, splendid half of the pair, author of the Jirel of Joiry stories for *Weird Tales*, and later of such *Astounding* tours de force as *Judgment Night*. She was a wonder, no two ways about it, and those of you who have never heard of her, I suggest you repair the damage. Her work is timeless . . . you will find it as modern as today, and you will find it modern fifty years from now, I strongly suspect.

Kuttner was the wordsmith of the pair; as much a marvel, in his own way, as she. His signature, too, is on this story, although very lightly, and it probably makes no injustice at all that Tor has now republished it as by Moore alone. What is new is "In Another Country," by Robert Silverberg, published with it as part of Tor's series of Doubles.

"In Another Country" is the sequel to "Vintage Season," if a story by another writer can be a sequel, and it isn't a sequel in any case, because of various factors. But it is, undoubtedly, equal in stature to "Vintage Season." And I suspect that even Robert Silverberg would quarrel with me there, but there it is.

I am not much for this kind of literary stunt. I haven't gone into it much in these pages, because it would make no difference — the people who put out this kind of thing aren't going to be deterred by anything I say, and, I suspected, while some of the writers some of the time are undoubtedly venal, some will not be; they genuinely get a spark of creativity from the pre-existing material, and away they go. And, really, God bless them — I just don't want to review the result.

In the case of "Another Country," we know several things up front; Silverberg doesn't need the money, for one, and the job was, really, harder than a man in Silverberg's

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position needs it to be.

He has pulled it off, nevertheless. What he did was not easy; he wrote another story set in the same circumstances, with different characters, in the cracks, so to speak left by the Moore. Since the Moore ends with the meteor destroying a major portion of the city, followed by the Blue Death to take care of most of the survivors, a sequel was hardly likely. The choice was between this, and the standard tale of survivors after a disaster, which Silverberg certainly had no interest in writing. And in any case, Silverberg made the right choice; he has found something new in the situation, and enlarged upon it brilliantly.

Which in a way is doubly ironic, because the odds are that few will notice. Tor Doubles, while probably a viable commercial property, aren't notably so. Furthermore, the circumstances of publication are much different. When "Vintage Season" ran in *Astounding*, it ran in the premier market for science fiction, and it ran in just about the only market that counted. [It's ironic — *Astounding* was hardly ever the circulation leader, but nobody paid much attention to what the other 'zines were doing.]

And — this is both hard to credit and tough to believe in its importance — there were no books. Oh, there were actually a few, but it was to be 1947 before the appearance of *Adventures in Time and Space*, which for the first time gave the world at large a thorough glimpse at what *Astounding* had been doing. What I mean to say is, "Vintage Season" came out in *the* premier SF medium, and everybody got it at once, and everybody got it properly presented. There were few distractions. Whereas "In Another Country" . . . Well, you see what I mean. The bulk of SF readers will get to know this new piece of work gradually — if at all. Despite the fact that it is a major piece.

And this, too, has to have passed through Robert Silverberg's mind, which is one of the shrewdest marketing minds of all time. And he did it anyway.

There is only one explanation for this. Love. Curiouser and curiouser.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Lens of the World, R.A. MacAvoy (Morrow, cloth, 288pp, $17.95)

NAZHURET BEGINS life as a student at an elite military academy — but he is no ordinary student, for though he must have had noble sponsorship to get into the school, he has no known parentage, and his profound ugliness makes him a butt of the other boys' worst behavior. But he survives, even finding a friend or two along the way, until at last he is forced by age to leave the school and strike out on his own. Almost at once he "happens" to find an enemy who becomes his teacher and then, at last, a kind of father to him; but all this is prelude to his emergence into the real world, where he finds himself called upon to act in the affairs of humble countrymen — and of kings.

Not every author aspires to create a Great Work (otherwise referred to as a "Magnum Opus"), and not all who attempt it achieve it. Those who do not have such high pretentions can be given credit for modesty; those who try and fail can be given credit for ambition. But those who aim high and reach the mark will always have a place of special honor in the rolls of literature.

R.A. MacAvoy's *Lens of the World* bears all the earmarks of an attempted Great Work. Instead of beginning with a character in jeopardy or a character being assigned a quest — the stock openings for multi-volume fantasies — we begin with an epistle from a trusted adviser (we assume) to his overlord. It seems that a middle-aged Nazhuret has been assigned to write his autobiography, and now is reluctantly fulfilling that request.

Uh-oh, I said to myself. An epistolary opening usually means that we are going to have a self-conscious reflective, tedious narrator who will constantly interrupt the story to comment on it. Sometimes, though, it means that we are going to be able to see a finely-honed, well-created character at several stages in his development, all at once. I wasn't surprised that MacAvoy was a writer who would try a Great Work; I was only worried that, like so many others, she might founder in the

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attempt.

My worries were groundless. Oh, her narrator's interruptions can be distracting at times, particularly when she uses them as a transitional device. But they are always brief, and if that is the only flaw in the finished novel, if she keeps up this level of storytelling, then MacAvoy will have added a new literary work to a shelf that is still not overcrowded: *The Lord of the Rings, The Book of the New Sun, The Once and Future King, Helliconia* — the massive projects of 20th century fantastic literature that succeed in every part; the Great Works that deserve to outlive their authors.

Of course, she could still blow it. But so far, so good. This first volume promises much in the volumes to come — and yet it manages almost complete closure in itself, so you don't need to wait for the series to end before you start reading. More important, she has found that delicate balance between story and art, between romance and aesthetics. As far as story is concerned, she uses all the old romantic motifs and makes them fresh: The child of unknown parentage who, odd man out, suddenly discovers himself to have a native country, a noble birth, and a remarkable destiny; the enigmatic figure who emerges from disguise; the character who changes sexes; passages through water, through caverns, through darkness, and through death; the parent-figure who rejects one child and accepts another, for reasons that neither understands.

And when it comes to the art, MacAvoy has met *my* standards, which may be different from your average college English teacher's but are also higher. She has mastered the difficult tasks of creating a narrative voice that is not her own; of writing clearly and gracefully without ever interfering with the onward flow of the story; and of so connecting symbol and metaphor to the literal story that they are inseparable. It is possible to read this story for sheer entertainment, without ever suspecting that one is experiencing "art" at all. And that is when the art of storytelling is at its best.

Laying the Music to Rest, Dean Wesley Smith (Popular Library/ Questar, paper, 194pp, $3.95)

It's one of the rules of writing science fiction and fantasy: You can make your readers swallow *one* porcupine, but you can't make them swallow *two*. I mean, I'll buy time travel, with all that that entails, but then don't make me deal with reincarnation or poltergeists or alien ancestors of humanity in the same book.

Like all literary rules, of course, this doesn't mean you *can't* make a

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two-porcupine book work, it just means you have to work a hell of a lot harder to bring it off. And I must tell you, right off the bat, that Dean Wesley Smith does *not* do what's necessary to let you swallow both porcupines in *Laying the Music to Rest.* Indeed, this might even be a three-porcupine story, when you figure that not only do we have time travelers carrying on a future war in our own time, but also we have a ghost of a woman who drowned in an old Idaho mining town disturbing some contemporary wilderness freaks trying to build a rough-country resort in her haunting grounds: and when, exactly halfway through the book, we suddenly find ourselves trapped in a time loop on the deck of the *Titanic,* of all things; well, you can swallow hard if you want, but you'll end up with quills in your throat. Maybe with the proper foreshadowing and with three times this number of pages Smith could have made these elements work together, but as it stands, credibility is down the toilet.

But credibility isn't everything, and Smith is a damned good writer, and what *does* work in this book works very well, which is why it's getting reviewed in a books-to-look-for column. Even if the parts don't fit together well, the parts are all very good. The ghost story is one of those love-stories-of-the-dead that are a pleasure to read even when you know you're being had. The war-among-time-travelers story is thin and perfunctory, but once we get to the deck of the *Titanic* we find ourselves immersed (sorry) in a terrific little caper with a lot of fast action, the kind of science fiction that we used to love before we got all serious about it. In short, except for having to swallow painfully a few times, this book is a lot of fun. And now that Smith has gotten a couple of completely unrelated and incompatible storylines out of the way in a single entertaining volume, I'm looking forward to seeing what he does next.

The Golden Thread, Suzy McKee Charnas (Bantam, cloth, YA, 209pp, $15.95)

I hope there's no high school or junior high library in America that does not have copies of Charnas's Sorcery Hall series. (The dustjacket calls it a trilogy, but the ending of this third volume is so clearly open-ended that I would be surprised if Charnas hadn't already plotted out volume four.) These stories of Valentine Marsh, who has inherited her family's sorcerous powers and is learning to use them despite the opposition of her mother, are extraordinarily good as fantasy *and* as young adult literature.

Part of the key to Charnas's success with these books is that she

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doesn't have Valentine Marsh follow the genre cliche, becoming an isolated recluse alienated from society. Instead she has good friends and gets along at high school about as well as anyone; she also has strong and real romantic interests that never wallow in coming-of-age cliches.

In *The Golden Thread*, Valentine finds "celebrating" New Year's at a sort of anti-party for people who didn't have much to be happy about in the year before. Valentine's own grief is that her grandmother, the woman who taught her all she knows about magic, is in a coma, expected to die. At the party, one particularly obnoxious girl suggests they form a ring to launch a shooting star — a tacky suggestion, but Valentine nevertheless forlornly joins the circle. The result is that they inadvertently summon a goddess from Somewhere Else — and discover that people of such enormous power don't always make for good company.

The book is a fine mix of funny and scary and real, and although I don't get as sentimental about dolphins and whales as some people do, I liked the rest of the book well enough to forgive Charnas the semi-dopey off-the-wall resolution of one of the plot threads. That one misgiving of mine won't be a barrier to most readers; I think this book is a sure hit, even for adolescents and mature children who think they don't like fantasy.

The Jedera Adventure, Lloyd Alexander (Dutton, cloth, YA, 152pp)

I've been having fun with the Holly Vesper stories since Alexander began telling them with *The Illyrian Adventure* and *The El Dorado Adventure* several years ago. These books are pure romps — think of Indiana Jones as a teenage girl — set in the 19th century, so that there are still many corners of the world that are strange and forbidding and not entirely known.

As with all the other books, *The Jedera Adventure* begins with Vesper dragging her "guardian" to the ends of the Earth to accomplish some improbable purpose — in this case, to return a valuable book that her late father borrowed from a library in an ancient Arab city. As always, they immediately find themselves caught up in local struggles, with Vesper's audacity and intelligence often the key to resolving the situation.

But, far from descending into self-derivative cliche, as most series authors seem to do, Alexander seems to be taking these stories *more* seriously with each passing volume. Certainly in this book the "anything-for-a-joke" mentality rarely surfaces, though the comic figure of Maleesh, volunteer guide and occasional lover, is a pleasure on every page. Mean-

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while, the figure of An-Jalil, the rightful ruler of the city, takes on a kind of majesty missing from the earlier books. Indeed, with this volume Alexander seems to have struck the right balance between mythic grandeur and wry self-mockery that is the hallmark of the best of the grand romantic tradition.

It may be that Alexander's choice of a female protagonist was part of a conscious effort to write adventures for girls; but I believe these books transcend such audience stereotyping. I'd have no qualms handing these books to a boy as readily as to a girl. You can start with any of the series, since each book is completely self-contained, but if you haven't read any of this series before, I recommend that you begin with *The Jedera Adventure* as the best of a good lot.

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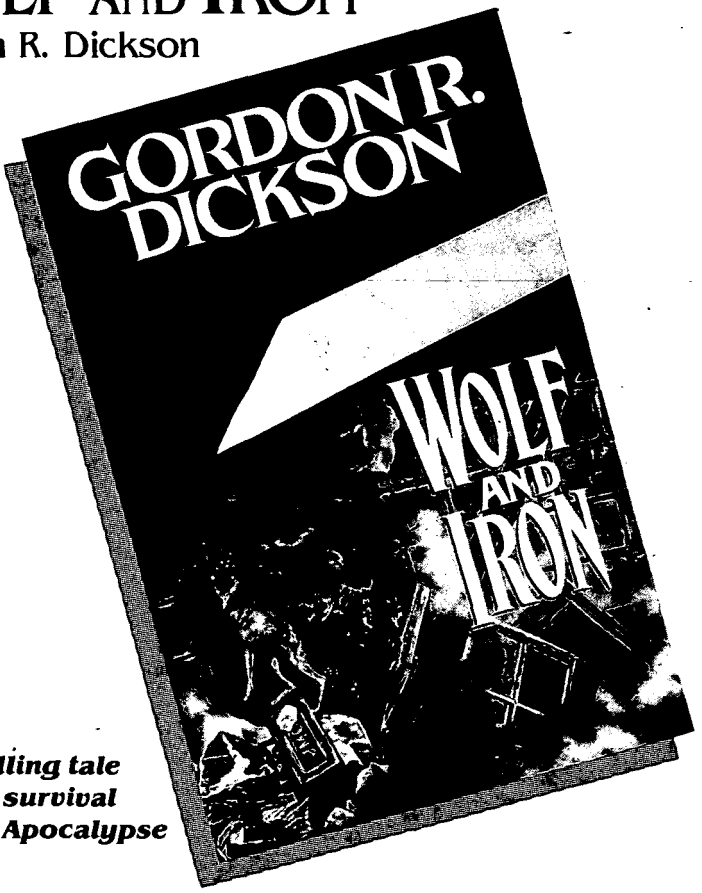
WOLF AND IRON

Gordon R. Dickson



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The Teller Told a Tale

By Gary Wright

I FANCIED NOT THE rake of his riggin' from the moment he bounded the rail an' hit the deck like a dancer. A mere slight whiplin' he were, more a lad than a man. A simple seedlin' with a girlish grace an' the wide-eyed, wonderin' countenance of a small child. Nearly pretty, some'd say. At first methought he were a youngish monger of some sly sorts, but it were little cargo he bore — a dwarfish journeybag an' an aged lute — an' then it all cleared for me. . . .

"An' *ye* be the *Teller*?"

I bothered not to mask me pure unbelief. In a voice as bright as a crystal bell, he said, "I am." An' he smiled upon me with such natural happiness I'd not beheld since me own mother joined the gods.

Ah, but somethin' in the eyes there was, a curious, distant glitter like sparks of a campfire winklin' into a windy night sky. I must of scowled at him too long, for he added, "Truly."

Methinks I said, "Ah. . . ," or somethin' clever like that. "Come. The cap'n."

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He followed me aft, grinnin' an' gazin' round at the masts an' the riggin' an' the deck clutter like it were all a magic an' exotic world. Well, the *Dolphinia* be not much exotic with a cargo of hides, an' the onliest certain magic about her be that she still spend her time on top of the water. The crew that was about on deck stared an' gaped, an' he returned their open wonder with a look as simplehearted as a kitten.

By Pandra's pud, methought, what sport! They'll have him gutted like a mackerel an' hung to dry afore the day's sun westers down . . . or more's-the-like he'll be betaken like a lass among the crew, an' that'll be the cast of it.

I glanced back at him. He proffered me the same happy, trustful smile. Perchance it were the onliest face he had. I knew not what to make of it. We sees overwhelmin' little of that sorts of thing, an' I felt a triflin' draft of sadness for him. It be one thing to be sheer innocent, an' quite another to be utter foolish of the ways of the world.

An' even if he survives the crew, I asked meself, what tales then of this voyage? Dainty faeries a-prance in the lull of the moon? Silly maids a-waste with giddy love? Mayhaps a chill an' frightful epic of a lost slipper. Some fine Teller, this! We'd all be down with the sweet sickness afore the Herbana Headland fell astern! I swung down the aft ladder, an' he copied as light as an elf. At the cabin door, I knocked for the captain. He said, "Come." We entered, an' I presented the lad.

"Capt'n Lanton, this here be the new . . . Teller." An' I couldn't help addin', "So he say."

I were a portion pleased to see the captain come aback too.

"An' how old be ye?" he frowned.

"I am of twenty years, my captain, and for the past four, I have been a pupil of Arkenese himself."

The captain luffed at that, an' I, too — not a bein' alive failed to know of Arkenese an' his Tales; he were close onto bein' a Tale hisself. The captain sounded his thoughtful grump.

"Ump-hum . . . then this be yer first true voyage as a Teller?"

"It is."

I noted that the smile never wavered, never fell off to an unease, that the eyes never shifted. I had to allow him a measure of assurance. Though barely a fledglin', he stood as if it were all old matter to him.

"But I have served my apprenticeship well, my captain."

"Ump-hum. . . ." The captain cast me a bleak eye an' a cocked eyebrow.

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I shrugged. He frowned back to the young Teller.

"Ye'll find us a rough lot, methinks. We be simple, hardworkin', hard-livin' men o' the sea. We liken to tales o' our sort. We . . . ump-hum. . . ." An' he kind o' run aground.

The lad rounded us with a smile like a well-thrown cast net. "Some things there are that never die."

He seemed well pleased with that statement.

"Ump-hum . . . well. . . ." The captain heaved a great sigh. "Show him the third cabin, Mate."

"Aye." I touched me chest an' nodded. The lad made a smilin' bow for the captain, some high courtly for a trade vessel, methought. I showed him to his berth an' where to store his gear. The captain called me to his cabin as I made my way back along the aft passage.

"Arno, what thinks ye?"

I scratched at me beard, offered a shrug an' a shake of me head.

"'Tis hard sayin', sar. The men may nar take to such a sliplin' lad . . . but. . . ." I gave another shrug. "It be a ugly matter now t'ship without a Teller. Like ye've said yerself, a crew ships better without the lash along." I grinned at him. "Mayhaps they be slightish spoiled now."

He nodded an' scowled at his tabletop. "When I told the Teller Guild o' our needs, they said there were now a great shortage. The war an' the trade to prop it up were takin' Tellers like they was grain an' wine." He shook his head. "But this lad. . . . They must be well down to the dregs."

We was both silent for a time, thinkin' — I know I were — of old Basilus, our Teller for . . . well, I know not how many years. He were aboard when I first shipped on the *Dolphinia* as a free oarsman. A certain fine Teller he were, knowin' our likin's to the length an' the beam, knowin' when we cared to laugh an' when we cared to follow the Epic of Marken an' when we cared to ponder thoughts of home. But a loosed lift block smashed them tales away along with most of his head, an' we were a grim an' silent ship slidin' into Herbana Harbor ten tides ago. Even our few slaves was touched by the loss. Old Basilus would sit on the bottom stair to the aft deck as we rowed through a calm, an' his old Teller's voice would carry the whole ship, an' he would tell a tale to the beat of the stroke, an' it seemed ofttimes that the *Dolphinia* swept a magic sea, an' the sun would wester down like the flight of a bird. Ah, I tells ya true, he were a Teller. . . .

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WE CAUGHT the mornin' tide an' rowed the harbor out against a head wind. We'd lost not a man to port — they'd stayed close aboard for fear of the soldierin' recruiters that prowled the docks for prey.— so we had a old, close crew that watched the young Teller from their stations an' followed him with their eyes as he flitted about the ship like a sparrow caught in an offshore wind. He were fascinated of this, then of that, then of somethin' anew. He were peerin' over the aft rail to watch the wake an' the work of the steerin' oar, then next onto the bowsprit to study the cleft of the prow, then swingin' from a stay to squint aloft at the hang an' trace of riggin'.

"'E'll be o'erbard like a fool puppy," old Leono , the Stroker, muttered to me. "An' me questions whether 'tis worth the sweat if we comes about fer 'im."

"We've heard nar from 'im yet." I said.

"Aye, an' me wonders if it be worth a ear to listen. Methinks me be too aged fer swaddlin' tales."

"Yer stroke be easin' off," I told him. "Haul it up."

He were embarrassed, an' scowled down at his drum. He were a goodly Stroker, a old, one-armed sailor, but he tended to speed up the stroke when excited, or back off when in a grump. I noted, too, that we was all a moody ship this day.

"Mate!" the captain called. He were squintin' off the steerside at the dark line of the Herbana Headland, measurin' the angle of its rocky tip to the set of the wind. "Bring 'er about to make the headland."

Methought it seemed a bit tight to clear the point, but he be the captain.

"Aye." I swung about an' gave the steerman the course by the cast of me arm, then faced the rowers an' held up me right fist. "Steerside, stow oars! Make sail!"

They hopped to it. *Make sail* were a lovely order when your back's been bendin' oars into a head wind. We came about to the new course; the two square sails rumbled as the booms was hauled aloft.

"Back steerside sheets! Tarside, stow oars!" The booms swung, the sails thumped full, the riggin' groaned as she heeled, an' we could feel the wind take her. I checked the steerman's point against the tip of the headland, the set of the sails, the slant of the wind, an' me own judgment. I gave him a new

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point: "Up a bit." I wanted all the leeway we could get off them rocks — the Herbana Headland be a ugly shore. He leaned back on the steerin' arm. I called for a bit of trim to the sails, then, "Deckmate! Chores!"

Pell, the deckmate, tapped his chest, nodded to me, an' began tellin' off the crew for chores.

"Teller!" It was the captain's call. The lad glided down from the aft mast, ridin' the back stay like a sailor born. He hit the aft deck without a stumble, grinnin' at this accomplishment, methought.

"My captain. . . ."

The captain cast me a somewhat somber glance as he said, "A tale, Teller. Let us sample your wares."

"Of course, my captain."

He dropped below an' returned with that old lute. He beseated hisself on a pallet of tanned hides an' gazed off for a moment at the horizon. That childish smile slipped nearly away, an' his eyes seemed to age. Except for the crash of the bow an' the hiss an' creak of our passage, there were not a sound aboard. Men were bent to their work, but it seemed to me that many a ear were canted aft. A soft yet carryin' chord sounded from the lute. Then he spoke as if from a distance, an' his voice were true different: more manly, richer, an' carryin' clear as a trumpet.

> *Under a brilliant, brazen sky, polished bright by racing clouds, she awaited her valiant, venturous crew to ply the hazardous blood-dark sea . . . the swift and beauteous* Ship of Kyle.
>
> *All brave and handsome men they were who slipped her compelling cables free, and, singing, setting oars to pins, they pointed her out from home. . . .*

A few eyebrows rose, an' more ears were bent toward the aft deck. Hands were careful to make little noise at their work.

> *. . . Then Marnan rose from watery throne, the harsh weaver of wind and wave, and jealous he of those who easily wend his realm, he roared and raged, raised wind and wave against her way, the arrow-sleek, splendid* Ship of Kyle. *Strong to oar, the gallant crew so bent the pins, she surged against dark Marnan's will and clove the sullen sea aside.*

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I noted the casual drift of the crew aft, findin' work at anythin' a bit closer to the tale. It began to be a bit crowded at the aft deck. I said nothin' 'bout it, nor did Pell, the deckmate.

> *The Captain Kyle stood tall afoot and grinned into the lashing spray. "Steerman, point her west," he called. "To the golden home of the sun! And damned be they who bar our way, for we make a heroes' run! . . ."*

There were a decided slowin' in the amount of chores bein' done. I caught Pell's eyes. He gave a small shrug. I answered it with one of me own. We be not a cruel vessel.

> *They laughed, that hardened crew of Kyle, at Marnan's cruel yet petty play. Untiring, singing, stirring songs, they bent the oaken oars so well the* Ship of Kyle *was likened to a surface bird with wingtips only swept the waves. And crashing on and cheering then, it seemed the willful waves lent leaping to their flight. . . .*

Captain Lanton cast me an eye. His eyebrows was bushed up nearly into his hair. I pursed me lips an' grudged a bit of a nod — this youngish Teller might do.

> *So through the hot and brutal day, they raced the westering sun along. It fell to home and drained the day like ebbing tide from shallow bay. Then Marnan, drawing strength from night, lent weight to wind and raised the waves like rolling walls. They laughed, that crew, and drove the spearlike* Ship of Kyle *through crashing dark and stormy brew. . . .*

I found meself frownin' far into our own wind, feelin' the hull take the quarterin' waves an' smash them aside. It be a fine passion, ridin' the surge of a ship. Methinks not a man aboard then truly saw what lay at hand, but were instead sailin' through some private, reckless storm of their own.

> *Laughing then, bold Captain Kyle appointed out the pivot star and*

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shouted down the raging night, "We keep the Spike to our steerside, men, and we drive her through to the light! . . ."

As from some dreamin' distance, I watched the crew raise clouded eyes an' fix their gazes bout out an' inward.

And even as the daywake dawn sparked alight the radiant sun, the sapphire sea impaired its pace, and Marnan's brutal breath blew down. "The match is ours!" cried Captain Kyle. "Hurrah!" returned the courageous crew. And so the second day began, and came their trial anew —

"Steerman!" the captain bawled. *"Yer point!"*

I came awake — we was pointed sharp into the Herbana Headland. Already the white teeth of breakers glared along the long jaw of that shore.

"Come about!" I bellowed. "To oars! Tarside backstroke! Steerside quick stroke!"

We was all chaos an' curses as men broke to stations. A man collided with Pell, an' he threw him into the steerside oar bank, where he took down four others in a flail an' tangle of arms, legs, an' oars. Some fool loosed a steerside aft sheet afore the tarside lines were ready, an' the aft sail thundered an' threatened to tangle the fore. Pell leaped into the steerside bank an' began flingin' men to their places. Those he couldn't sort out, he hurled clear over the middeck walkway into the tarside. We could hear the crash an' growl of the shore. I were a-shout with orders until order came about, an' we finally came to resemble a ship again instead of a tavern brawl. The *Dolphinia* staggered about like a drunken goose. It were the sloppiest turn a ship ever made. I were ashamed to swing an' face the captain, but it musts be done. I stiffened like a new line.

"Me fault, sar. I were a-dream."

"Was we all," he scowled, starin' at the deadly rocks now fallin' astern. "Enough tales for now, Teller."

Through the day we plied to the north, keepin' sight of shore. The crew behaved handsomely, as if ashamed of their earlier foolishment. As the sun westered down, we sought shelter behind the curl of Hook Head,

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where a ship may anchor safely from the pound an' the wind. There we built a beach fire of drift an' feasted on our simple fare. Guards were set on the steep bluff above the beach with spears an' swords, for this were wild country of beasts an' men outside the normal run of things. The captain, methought, had been more than usual quiet through the day, so I were surprised not when he caught me eye an' nodded me down the beach a ways. I were braced for a awesome tongue-lashin' — Captain Lanton be dreadful good at it — but he were instead some quiet.

"What thinks ye, Arno, of the event this foreday?"

"'Twere me full fault all the way, sar. I were —"

"Nar, Arno, I be pointin' not the blame. I, too, were adrift for a time." He frowned out at the *Dolphinia* at anchor for a while. "It come to me most curious that we all be so taken. 'Twere like some enchantment."

I offered, "'Twere a passin' good tale, methinks."

"Aye, I allow it that. But I been hearin' better from our old Basilus afore." His scowl tightened on the ship. "D'ye post a ship's guard?"

"Aye sar, fore an' aft. Belano an' Rayt."

He nodded.

"There be a peculiar feelin' in me, Arno," he said. "I saw somethin' in the rocks today. Somethin' dire."

But he said no more, an' we come back to the fire. The Teller were into a tale.

> *. . . And so the gods in brotherhood, upholding Marnan's spiteful wrath, did cause the sun to run a course anew. So slow it never was beheld, the sun it shifted north, while all the while the wind and wave did reach on steady west.*
>
> *"The wind abouts!" called Captain Kyle. "Make sail! The oars are finally done!" The wind came abeam to Marnan's scheme, and they pointed on to the faulty sun. The soggy breath of Folster then lay a fog upon wind. As dense as night, it wrapt the ship, and droplets from the rigging ran, yet on they sailed to the glowing cast of the now-new northern sun. . . .*

I cast me eyes about the circled men, an' there were not a one that listened not. They were all gazin' at the Teller, mouths agape, like he were a man of gold . . . an' 'twere all their'n.

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Now, in the north of the blood-dark sea are rocky isles like pebbles strewn, which feast on foolish ships of wood who there would point their careless way. And into this frothing lay of isles did the soaring Ship of Kyle *away.*

"Harken!" Captain Kyle called. "I hear the shout of a nearby shore." And listened they all to the breakers brawl. "Steerside! — quick to oar!"

Rapt attention were fixed on the Teller. It came to me he seemed much like a journeyman wizard doin' marvelous tricks for children.

The powerful men of the Ship of Kyle *leapt to oars and made the mighty sweeps to groan. Ahead the gnashing rocks foamed closer to their bow. So brave were they, they watched the jaws of death approach with not a cry or flick of eye. She came about so near, the frothing spray blew aboard and salted up their laughter. . . .*

I were jolted as the men laughed, like I bumped bottom a bit on a clear course, an' I cast an eye at the captain. He were wearin' a small, grim smile. It seemed not to fit well, for he were still frownin' from the nose up.

. . . They lay to the lee of that violent isle, and harbored well the Ship of Kyle *as creeping night seeped from the east. They feasted fine on roasted fowl and took their well-earned ease ashore, and, wrapt in warm and marvelous furs, they slept the righteous sleep of the brave.*

He smiled that kindly smile upon us all. The men yawned an' pulled what robes they had about them an' sank to the sand like they was drugged. I found meself caught up in a yawn that near sprung me jaw. The captain were seated an' starin' into the coals of the fire with a deep, distant gaze. It were a moment of passin' strange, yet I could think little on it, for the onset of sleep coaxed at me. I would of gone down like the others but for still scoldin' meself. I were about into a doze, when a scream clawed me into full alert. There were a rattle of stone as somethin' fell the face of the bluff. A frantic shot came from above. The captain called, "Arms!" just as I heaved a breath for the same.

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I yanked a bronze short-sword from the scramble at the arms stack, an' lighted a torch at the fire.

"Kelt!" I called to the guards on the bluff. "Edden!"

There were one more cry from above, cut off sharp, an' then another slide of gravel. With the torch aloft, I stalked to the foot of the bluff. Other torches flared as the drowsy men fanned out aside me, an' we seen two darker shadows in the rubble up the beach. They was Kelt an' Edden. They was mangled bad an' certain dead. A whole arm were torn from Kelt. An' Edden . . . well, we knew 'twere him; he were the onliest other. We raised eyes aloft, but there were not a sound from the night up there.

"What manner of beast does this?" the captain growled. He gained no answer. The men was gatherin' in together, weapons leveled out at the night, eyes wide an' rollin' at the now-forbidding darkness about us.

"Me thinks to the ship, sar," I muttered to him, "afore the men bolts." He nodded.

"Bring Kelt an' Edden," I said. "Clear the beach. To the ship."

Belano an' Rayt had lit torches aboard. We loaded the small-boat with the bodies an' our gear. Most of the men swam. Pell an' me stayed at the water's edge till all were clear, then swam for it. We spent the backside of the night with arms at hands, half crew to watch, with the rest but nappin', no light to blind our eyes. It were a cold, uneasy night.

THE WIND stayed fair from the west as we coasted north the followin' day. We delivered our fallen shipmates to the sea — Marnan's Price, 'tis known — an' Pell shifted men to balance the side crews. We would have a single-manned oar to a side now, but Pell would throw himself in when needed. An' I, too — we'd been to that afore. It ofttimes does the men a good to see the mates bend a back.

We was a quiet ship again, an' I was begun to like not this voyage. Though Helia, the Taker, comes often enough at sea, we'd been long without her visit. An' now, in the narrow space of a half-moon, three went to meet her — old Basilus, Kelt, an' Edden. It feared the men to have Helia lurkin' close at hand, an' I liked it not.

Under firm sail, most the men had gathered forward around the Teller. I made me way along the walkway between the oar banks, inspectin' the proper stowage of the oars, lookin' at this, tuggin' at that, but castin' me ear more forward.

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. . . and from the darkest caves of night, from the island's secret cove, something huge and furtive came on crafty claws to overlook the sleeping men. With hunger deep, with ruthless Helia by its side, it closer crept, its eyes alight with savage fire. The men of night-bound Ship of Kyle *slept on in peace as onward came dark Helia's pet, the slathering, ravenous Beast of Hell.*

The way the words ran from his tongue made the flesh tingle up the spine. An' somethin' in the eyes an' voice there was, somethin' harsh yet . . . warm, as if the words were well-flavored.

For a restive moment, time gave pause as Helia cast her fateful die to fathom who among the sleeping men would join her this horrid night. And in that scrap of frozen time, the Beast, in panting pangs of hunger, allowed its foulish breath to waft across the breeze and along the quiet beach. The stench was such that Captain Kyle sprang to his feet with a shining blade of sharpest bronze.

"Awake, good men, and take up arms! The reek of Helia's deadly air rides upon the wind."

I felt a thing like a fist in me gut. This strange tale, methought, were just a bit too fresh.

But once dark Helia's die is cast, no action cancels out its call, and two men went to join her on the banks of the languid River Pall.

"Enough!" I called, mayhaps a bit too loud, for several men were startled, an' although I knew we was a fit craft, I put 'em all to inspectin' lines, bilge, an' cargo. An' I told the Teller what methought of such a tale echoin' close on the deaths of Kelt an' Edden. When a anger comes upon me, me words tend to run unshielded. An' lad or not, Teller or whatever, stupid be as stupid do.

He did not take it well.

That night ashore, with arms close at hand an' guards set, the Teller began anew.

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The speedy Ship of Kyle *drove on, and gods conferred about her fate, but Marnan was yet fired with fury and set a serpent in her way. So, under sail, the men at ease, a splash to tarside caught all eyes. "Methinks a tentacle," said one by the rail. "That it could . . . or a scaly tail." And in the following laughter bold, they never saw the horrible head that rose to steerside with jaws agape . . . and in a wink a man was lifted, chewed and eaten as a grape.*

"That be a bit grim, Teller!" I snorted. A cold spider of some dread crawled up me spine. He smiled me that warm an' generous smile, an' he continued, the men all wide-eyed an' agape at the tellin.'

As fast as Helia come again, to the cooking coals sprang the mate, and, seizing up the fiery pan, hurled it full into those frightful eyes. The monster screamed and dived from sight —

ASLEEP!" I bellowed. "We have a hard haul at the oars tomorrow. Tales such like this ward against sleep."

The Teller cast me a hard look. The men grumbled but settled down. Captain Lanton called me aside — to check the guards, he said — but once out of hearin' of the rest, he gave me a frown.

"What be it, Arno?" You be snarlin' today like a dog with a sore bung."

I scowled away into the dark to shape what it were that gnarled at me so.

"I has t'tell it true, sar: it be the Teller. I like not the cast o' his tales. They be o' a grim an' morbid sort, they be, an' ofttimes they be sailin' too close to true. I never heared such."

He grunted. "The drift comes at me the same, Arno. He be caught on a singular course, it seem. Mayhaps they be those 'undyin' things' o' what he spoke. Methinks I be talkin' to 'im 'bout it."

He did so, an' for three days we cruised the Western Reach without a thing to cause remark. The Teller told tales of a milder sort, an' even a classic or two, but those eyes held a rare glint as they followed Captain Lanton — an' even a time or two, I caught them cast at me. We were under mild sail an' lazin' our way, when the thing happened.

There were a lash of spray to tarside, an' the bulk of somethin' rollin'

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in a wave. A whale, mayhaps. Someone said somethin' that set the others to laughin', an' they never saw the thing that raised drippin' over the steerside rail. Its head were the size of a whole oz. Its eyes was the size of shields, an' just as bright an' lifeless. It opened its awful maw an' plucked Samon up by his head. With a toss, it flipped him in the air an' caught him with teeth like swords. There were a grisly crunch, an' we could see a lump slide down its scaly throat.

We was all froze solid. The leviathan serpent regarded us from stem to stern as if we was a choice platter set for feast. Whether it were a glint of memory or me own quick notion, I cannot now say, but in a turn so brisk I hurt me knee, I snatched up the pan of cookin' coals an' heaved it at those dreadful eyes. There were a horrid roar, an' the monstrous thing flailed from sight in a crash of waves. I doubts that a call to oars were given — I heard it *not* — but within a heartbeat, it seemed every man were bendin' oar till the whole ship groaned. I, too, were haulin' hard on the oak, the pulpy skin of me hands peeling off like a torn shirt — they was vicious burned.

We anchored early that evenin'. The captain stalked the center walkway an' glared down at the men, his scowl like a foul storm buildin' in from the west.

"Has any amongst ye given falsehood? Have ye been cursed an' sworn otherwise when ye shipped?"

There were a mutter, an exchange of glances, an' a shakin' of heads.

"Has any amongst ye done a deed of late that be attractin' the wrath of the gods?"

They cast furtive glances at each other an' again avowed innocence. We exchanged looks, the captain an' me. He shook his head in mystery. I suggested we inspect the beach, he an' me, for I feared it may not be a safe shore. He gave me a narrow eye, for he knew that were a foolish worriment.

Once ashore, I knew not how to say the thing I must say, but crazy or not, it must be out. I asked him to withhold scorn till it all be said. And so I told him of the Teller's tale about a monster come at sea, an' how the tellin' were too close to the deed. He asked how this could be. I asked how could such a serpent be, an' what beast would silently render two men in the night. We walked and regarded such questions. He cited the olden expression: Tempt not the things of Hell lest the naming coax them

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forth. An' then his gatherin' storm broke.

We made back to the ship, an' he rigged the Teller a whole new arse. He suggested things about the lad that made a few of our old veterans blink. He raised questions about ancestral possibilities that had some of our duller ones tryin' to work it out on their fingers. He finished by makin' it clear as summer sunrise that any future tale in which he could find any workable fault would result in the Teller spinnin' it out for the gulls on some lonely, seabound rock. The Teller denied any onus — what else? — and offered us such a front of anger that he seemed much like a child under full pout. He dealt the captain's back a most hateful look, an' had enough left for me. I cast it back.

It were a quiet camp. The sullen Teller told no tale, an' it seemed no one favored to hear one.

I made way down the beach, found a secluded spot, built a small shrine, and prayed Marin for guidance. To abandon a man on some desolate shore without proper an' just reason be an offense akin to murder. And I had not proper cause to entertain such notion, as pleasin' as it may appear.

I be a crude, unfinished man. Rough, 'tis said. Hard an' sometimes mean, but I try t'be true to meself an' me heart beliefs. I honest try. Suspicions be suspect. Happenstance fortune sometimes befalls. The Teller told a tale. It come true. But still. . . .

It were in the deepest night, when a most terrible roar burst me from sleep, an' I wakened to see poor, dull Loren, the firewatch, be torn in two by a hideous beast of worst nightmares. It stood three men tall, with eyes ablaze in hellish light, a monstrous lizard. Mayhaps Helia's dragon — I had not the time to ponder. One clawed forefoot held the captain aloft, and as I watched, it crushed him as one could mash an overripe fruit.

I rolled away, snatching up the sword I now slept with as mistress. Raw hands shunned, I felt only its good weight. The thing followed, those ghastly eyes fixed on mine. I would not of cleared its attack but for gallant Pell, who charged like a demon an' drove a spear into its side. It whirled, struck like a great snake, and brave Pell was gone, beheaded; but in the turn, it thrust a foot in the fire. The thing bellowed, and the huge tail lashed. It caught me full, and I were flung into the darkness away from the fire.

I careened to me feet. I were a half-man tall an' a handspan wide,

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cracked apart in the middle. Me chest were afire with smashed ribs, but little matter — I seen hulls stove in an' still set sail. Me sword were still a-hand. 'Twere all I needed. I clamped meself together with me other arm an' headed back to the fray.

It were a horrid sight. The men were doin' their best. They ringed the creature with spear an' sword, torched to threaten its eyes, but bodies littered the beach like drift after a storm. By happenstance then, on the shadowy edge of the whirl an' chaos, I seen a thing so out of place it luffed me to a halt — I were full run aground in horror — the Teller were grinnin' a grin of madness. His eyes was a-shine with a lurid light, an' he were watchin' the monster like it were some pretty pet at play. His lips was movin', spittle glittered, an' methought I could hear the harsh mutter of a tale. I know not fully what compelled me — a high rage, surely; mayhaps a sudden understandin' — but I leaped at me right an' backhanded a swing that took off his head at the roots. Gods, I'll forget it never! His head flipped over backward like a coin spun, an' it hit the ground face up — an' it were still a-grin, but now at me.

What a champion joke this be, he seemed to be sayin'. *Just wait till this rich tale be told.*

New shouts from the men caused me to whirl on the defense, but what I seen were the monstrosity meltin' down like wax set too close to the fire. Its sour flesh sloughed off. It gave a horrible, bubbly moan. We backed off, aghast, an' in a passin' while, it were but a puddle of evil stench, an' then it were nothin' more, like the earth had swallowed it away.

In the pallid light of dawn, we buried our dead above the reach of the storm tide. We piled them a good cairn an' told the rite. I cared not to take them aboard for burial at sea, lest some grim evil yet cling to the mauled bodies. We'd seen enough for this while. Silent work, it were. The Teller we buried far apart. I insisted on a right hefty pile, an', although I mentioned it not — the men was already too astir — I wished I had a piece of spare iron or a bit of amethyst to lay above the carcass to nail it down. I also palmed the proper copper coin instead of leavin' it in his mouth — let him beg his way, methought. I told the men it were a accident, this Teller being hit — he'd stood too close at me hand. Those things happen. It were a matter now between me an' the gods, an' I'll take me chances.

We come down to the *Dolphinia* a quiet band, what there was left of us. As best we could, we set sail for Solberia.

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* * *

It were over a year later. We were again to Herbana, layin' on cargo. Captain Lanton's young brother were now the owner, but I were the captain. An', as tradition called in such a case when death visits so well an' cast its pall, the *Dolphinia* were no more, an' she were now renamed the *Lady Spray*, had been for the year past. I were takin' a bit of ease in a noisy port tavern — the Sign of the Dancin' Duck, it were — when me ear caught a name — *Dolphinia*. . . .

I came hard about. There was a Teller in a dark corner with a group around him in the clamor an' the smoke. His back were to me, an' I leaned me ear into the babble to catch the cast of the tale.

> . . . *And so the handsome ship* Dolphinia, *with oars like wings and sails like clouds, did course her way on the blood-dark sea in violation of harsh Marnan's will. Brave Arno, mate, he stood and cast the point straight past the prow, and on they soared to lands anew where no man knew what Fates allow*. . . .

An' he turned then, this youngish Teller, an' he smiled upon me with such natural happiness I'd not beheld since last I'd seen it. An' somethin' in the eyes there was, somethin' dreadful dark an' evil . . . yet so very pleased. Assured. I'd seen it all there before. An' it seemed to dare me now, that look: wouldst hear yet another tale? Some things there be that never die.

Though chilled, methought I can try, Teller. I can try. Mayhaps there one day be a Tale o' Arno. How he fought the things all told.

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Inside Science Fiction

BY CHARLES PLATT

TOO MANY BOOKS

THE PROBLEM is," said Larry, the large hairy man behind the register, "there are too many books."

I was in my local specialty bookstore, browsing among the glossy pictures of muscle-men in black leather combat suits, blond women with large breasts and wires coming out of their heads, dragons, castles, gnomes, men with swords, wizards with swords, aliens with swords, and so on. There were scores of new titles for the buyer to choose from, which seemed to imply scores of opportunities for the store to make money. "*Too many* books?" I exclaimed. "How can that be?"

"Overall, sales are down a bit," Larry told me, folding his arms across his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles T-shirt. "But we keep getting the same number of titles each month. Some publishers have even started putting out more. So, each title gets a smaller slice of the pie. It's crazy, because below a certain number of copies, no one makes money out of a book."

He pointed to a massive rack of new releases by small-name authors. "Nationally, those will sell only 10,000 or 15,000 apiece. But think, if there were half as many titles they'd probably sell twice as many of each, and everyone would be better off."

I pondered this vision of an alternate universe in which publishers cooperatively agreed they had flooded the market, and sensibly restrained their output. Would it really work out? "Suppose that book there had never been published," I said, pointing to one of them. "How can you guarantee that the person who would have bought it would automatically buy something else instead?"

"I can't guarantee it," he agreed, "but I'd bet on it. Right now there's so many titles, no one can keep track. You could chop the number in half, and readers wouldn't know the difference. They'd still have ten

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times as many choices as they could read."

He turned away to ring up a sale. It was time, I decided, to do a little research.

* * *

Where better to start than Ace Books? They produce more paperback titles than anyone else, so you'd expect them to have a positive outlook on quantity publishing.

But when I spoke with Susan Allison, Vice President and Editor in Chief, she shared Larry's lament. "Without a doubt," she said, "the main problem in paperback science fiction is that there are too many books. It's very hard to draw attention to any one title, because they all get lost in the flood, which means it's tough for a new author to build a reputation. Also, each book tends to get yanked off the shelves after a month or so, to make room for the new ones coming in. There are simply too many titles compared with the number of readers."

Should I conclude from this that Ace was planning a cutback?

"No, because I would lose my retail display space to another publisher. It would also get announced in trade magazines, which would be a bad message to send out. And if I did, say, six books a month instead of ten, I would have three years' worth of new manuscripts waiting to be published instead of two, so I couldn't acquire anything for a while, which wouldn't exactly delight the authors." She paused. "You know, I seem to remember back in the late 1970s Ace Books did actually cut back, from twelve titles a month to nine. But this did not result in bookstores taking more copies of each title. They just said, 'Thank god, fewer books!'"

I imagined for a moment a whole system of publishing, distribution, and retailing which everyone basically agreed was wasteful and foolish, while no one had the power to do anything about it. Could things really be that bad?

"It might help if we could eliminate the practice of sending out books as returnable items. Bookstores have no reason to order selectively, because they know they can return anything that doesn't sell. So they try a little bit of everything."

"You'd never get bookstores to go along with it voluntarily," I objected.

"Of course not," she cheerfully agreed. "So the fact is, I don't have anything very helpful or innovative to say on this topic. Maybe you should speak to David Hartwell. He'll probably have a theory for you."

I thanked Ms. Allison and de-

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cided to take her advice. Hartwell is currently Director of Science Fiction at William Morrow and a consulting editor at Tor Books. He also teaches at Harvard, and has been a science-fiction bibliophile all his life.

He turned out to have a theory, just as Susan Allison predicted. But it wasn't very encouraging. "It's quite true that there is a very large concern among all publishers that we have reached a condition of overproduction," he said. "But let's look at the reason for this. In a generally expanding market it is possible to expand your number of titles and your sales using marketing alone. You don't need to have expertise in editing, and you don't need taste or experience. You simply build up a kind of careening juggernaut driven by marketing techniques, racing against other careening juggernauts, trying to outrun your returns — the unsold copies sent back by bookstores. If you stop to take a breath, the returns catch up with you and, at least on paper in the short run, you lose money. This is unacceptable at a time when editors, vice-presidents, and even company presidents are all afraid for their jobs. So to cut back, you'd have to have a publishing corporation that wishes to suffer through a very negative period. And right now, I know of none."

Still, if what he said was true, commercial realities might eventually *force* publishers to cut back.

"This may be so. And I believe this is a problem without scale, so that little publishers and big publishers alike may find themselves pushed to the wall."

Sobering stuff! I wondered if I would find a more hopeful analysis if I asked elsewhere — at Bantam books, for instance. Bantam, after all, is the richest and most powerful of New York paperback publishers, and definitely not in the habit of doomsaying.

I called Betsy Mitchell, Associate Publisher of Spectra and Foundation, Bantam's two science-fiction imprints. Would she agree that, generally speaking, there were too many books?

"What we really need are more readers," she said, with a tone of such sincerity, she almost convinced me she wasn't evading the question. "There's an advantage in having so many titles out there — even titles that don't sell in large numbers. They create more chances to pique the interest of readers and maybe expand the audience."

But is it economically feasible?

"It's true that the same size pie, in terms of readers, is being cut into smaller and smaller pieces. But when this has happened before, it's the little publishers who get

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squeezed out. So I would say that the marginal publishers of science fiction have to be real careful in uncertain times like these."

Meaning — what? Which "marginal" publishers did she have in mind?

"Heavens, I'm not going to name them. Do you think I'm crazy?"

I apologized for my indiscretion. Dealing purely with Bantam itself: did it have any plans to publish less?

"No, we feel no pressure to cut back the size of either of our lists." She sounded as uncompromising as a press release. "You know," she went on, "you're giving the impression that some of our midlist books might not be worth publishing. I assure you that we believe when we buy any book, it definitely *is* worth publishing."

Well, ahem, of course. In fear of offending Ms. Mitchell any further, I turned to John Douglas, Senior Editor at Avon Books. He currently plans to *increase* his output of science fiction, from two to three new titles a month. This seemed an odd decision. Weren't there already too many books out there?

"I think some other publishers are doing too many titles," he said. "And this does make things tediously competitive. But let's suppose everyone agreed to cut back their output. Undoubtedly, brand new publishers would come out of nowhere and fill the gap. The imperatives of the business are growth oriented, even now. If you don't grow, you're in trouble. What you may be doing is attempting to take the food out of some other publisher's mouth, but that's how the competitive economy functions, and I believe in the free market."

I said that this sounded like a very sanguine outlook.

"The system is in place, and I may not like it, but I have to live with it. So basically I can't afford *not* to have a sanguine outlook."

I thanked Mr. Douglas for his assessment and reflected that of all four editors, none had denied that some sort of problem existed — while making it clear, of course, that they weren't personally responsible for it.

Maybe I'd get more straight talk if I turned to someone whose job wasn't at stake. I called Steve Brown, publisher of the fine magazine *Science Fiction Eye*. Brown once worked for Olsson's Books and Records, the largest independent bookstore in Washington, DC, where he handled a lot of the mass-market buying and controlled the mystery and science-fiction departments.

I asked him to imagine how large general bookstores might respond to an overall cutback in

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science fiction. Would they keep half as many titles on display for twice as long?

"Definitely not. Shelves allocated to science fiction would shrink. Moreover, they would end up being populated solely by fantasy trilogies and bestselling name-authors. Idealistically, I'd like to see fewer books, because there are so many bad ones out there. But pragmatically, I'm afraid the good ones, the chancy ones, the interesting ones, would be the first to go."

Did Brown think there was a real chance of some sort of cutback actually occurring, despite pronouncements from publishers to the contrary?

"There may actually be a big change in the offing. Outside of science fiction, the bestseller mentality has led publishers to gamble very large sums on a very few authors. They're squandering limited financial resources on a very few tosses of the dice. If the dice hit, then everybody's okay; but if not, the fallout could affect numerous marginal authors. Moreover, chains such as B. Dalton and Waldenbooks encourage this tendency to make large gambles on a few titles. They want it that way; they want to fill a huge area with 150 copies of the same book."

But surely, bookstore chains don't control the industry.

"The chains, and supermarket rack jobbers which choose maybe a

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dozen science-fiction paperbacks out of the ocean, are where most books are now sold. The store I used to work for is now a dinosaur. Outside of places like Washington and New York, the big general bookstore has generally vanished. And even when I was at Olsson's, it was a constant struggle. I was inundated by product all the time. Books were crowding each other off the shelves. I tried to display titles that I considered worthwhile, but it ended up a process of unending frustration — which is why I turned my back on American bookselling."

* * *

Back at my science-fiction specialty store, I told Larry the sobering results of my research. He listened while he sold a book with a giant snail on the cover to a teenager wearing fluorescent green sneakers and a baseball cap turned back-to-front.

"So," I finished up, "no one's going to cut back unless they're forced to by financial crisis — which may come sooner than we think." Struck by a sudden thought, I turned to the teenaged book buyer. "Tell me," I said, "if there were fewer books —like, if that one you just bought didn't exist — what would you buy instead?"

He barely hesitated. "Nintendo cartridges," he said.

Behind the register, Larry shrugged and spread his hands.

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Esther Friesner's most recent novel is HOORAY FOR HELLYWOOD. Ms. Friesner is one of this field's premier humorists, but here is something completely different . . .

WHAMMY

By Esther M. Friesner

OU'D BETTER BE NICE TO me, or I'll make you sorry," she said. She stared at me, her small, dark eyes made even smaller by the thick glasses she wore. I thought I saw the fire there again, down in the deep places behind the glass, where the dark kept secrets. I backed away.

Her father laughed. He hadn't seen anything. "What kind of way is that to talk, Ginny? You just met Alice. Now say hello nicely, the way a good girl does."

"I don't care." The child's fists were two little stones, weighing her skinny arms down stiffly at her sides. "I know why you brought her here to meet me, and I want her to *know!*"

"To know what?" He was indulging her, I could tell. He made a habit of it. She was his only child, his precious baby girl. I wasn't even there when he spoke to her. He squatted to put himself down to her level, looking just like a big bullfrog. His grin was that wide, that taut, but

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his eyes were almost as small and sly as his daughter's.

"I want her to know that *I* know what happens to wicked stepmothers," she said, tucking her chin deep into her collar, trying to make me not be there anymore by ignoring me. That was her magic. It tickled my spine like a lizard's tongue. Every knob of bone it touched went cold. That was when I first knew what she really was.

He laughed again, then decided to let me be there. With a rogue's wink, he made me visible. "How about that, Alice? Ginny's got the two of us married off already." He turned his whole self back to his child, and I was gone. "You believe me, sweetheart; Alice would never be a wicked stepmother to you. She's a very nice lady, and she knows how much I love you."

"But she doesn't love me," the child replied. I counted the pale brown freckles across the bridge of her snubby nose, trying to get their number exactly. If I could do that, if I could hold some secret part of her without her knowing, I would have power over her. She would be no more of a threat to what I had to have. "She doesn't!" She tossed her head, and I lost the tally.

"She will love you," her father said, stroking the child's fine hair. It was a very ugly color — what they call mousy brown, but mice are pretty creatures, so small and clean. Children are dirty. Not even my hair was that ugly, before I learned how to save my money and go to the beauty parlor without anyone knowing until too late to stop me. "You have to give her the chance to know you; and you have to give yourself the chance to know her."

Her chin came up. She fixed me with a hard stare. I was good. I didn't look away, even when it hurt. "Well, O.K.," she said slowly. Her lower lip looked changed, or maybe bitten. "But I warned her."

Later that night he left her with his sister and came back to my apartment. We made love in all the ways he wanted, and my habit of tears without sobs seemed to please him more than ever. When his fingers rippled over the rise of my breasts and I could not help but shudder, I burrowed my head into the warmth of his neck as if I were shaking because the joy of it was too great for me to bear.

"Alice. . . ." He breathed my name over me. It hissed like a fisherman's net sliding over the waves, sinking down to trap all the pretty fish. "Alice. . . ."

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I tried to shout out the sound of the mesh that slithered over my skin. He was hot and heavy on me, still just holding me tight and being thankful for what I gave him, but sometimes he came back for a second time. *Oh God, just let him sleep,* I prayed. *This was enough; I was good. Just let him want to sleep now.* But he didn't. It wasn't all that big a sorrow for me — so far as I keep tally, God has seen fit to answer my prayers more times than not. He's taken good care of me, better than I deserve. Sometimes it's His turn to have it His way.

But there are ways to change His mind, sometimes, when you want a thing bad enough. There are things you can do, words you can say, and bargains a woman makes. If she knows.

He didn't want to go right off to sleep after our second time, but it wasn't all that bad, because he didn't want to have a third time, either. He said he wanted to talk. That meant he wanted me to listen. It didn't take him very long to get around to what he really had to say. He asked me to marry him, and I said yes. The fire burned high. *So I won,* I thought. *I finally won.*

We didn't wait too long or go to too much bother over the ceremony. We both agreed to keep it small and simple, but it did have to be in a holy place, or it wouldn't count. He didn't have much family besides his sister's bunch and his daughter. I don't even remember when it was I told him I didn't have any kin alive at all. Everything he wanted, I gave. The only thing I asked for was to put off the ceremony a month when he wanted it right away. I had things to do, you see. It would have all gone bad if I'd let them go undone.

But a month is a short time, a very short time to make so many important preparations. Things get done slapdash, or halfway, or skipped over so that not doing them at all would have been better for me. I was in too much of a hurry to be married to him. I forgot what really matters.

You'd better be nice to me.

I was. Even if she hadn't said that, I made a promise, and you know how badly life goes for people who break their given word. I did my best; I always try.

We were all very happy. Yes, we were, the three of us: family. I remember the joy of it, how happiness jolted all the breath from my body, and wonder flooded warm into all the empty places the fleeing breath had made. I went around the house with my mouth ever so slightly open, my

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lips parted to drink love from the sunlight, to utter a song of thanksgiving only the air could hear. I was a miracle, reborn, and she had given me birth. I loved her for that. I was grateful.

She smiled when she saw me at the wedding. The hard look was gone — I never thought to ask where. I chose ignorance with my eyes wide open; that is my shame. She put down her flower girl's basket of torn rose petals and hugged me on the steps of the altar. She gave me a shy kiss on the cheek, bumping her glasses awkwardly into the side of my nose, then making great show of a child's most charming deceit: contrition. It was all unexpected, a boon from God's own hand, magic to have in my heart's closest keeping. It was a gift. I held tight to its giving, and never asked why I should be worthy to have such bounty or who the true giver was.

"I knew it would be like this," my husband told me as we lay together in his bed for the first time. I had sublet my apartment. My old furniture was gone, all gone, gladly gone. I hired two strong boys from one of the city colleges, and leased a pickup truck for them to haul it to the dump. Later that night I came back to where it lay, spindleshank bed and shiny-top dresser, vanity mirrored in a broken glass, teetery chair and hungering table. I sang fire, and it burned, every stick. I watched all the ghosts ride smoking horses into the sky.

Now his bed was mine as well. There was nothing I brought from the old life to taint this one. With the last of my savings, I bought myself all new clothes. Everything was new. I rubbed the ashes from my burned bed deep into my skin the night before we married, then washed them away in the moonlight. Darkness draws out darkness. I was clean.

"Are you happy?" he asked me. "Like this?"

"I hoped it would be like this," I admitted. "I did."

"That was some surprise at the wedding, the way Ginny took to you." He spoke to the ceiling, but I knew his mind was down the hall in the little room I had prepared with my own hands; my gift to her. All of a school day spent hanging new paper, repainting wooden trim, putting up the frothy yellow sunshine curtains I had made with these hands, and the matching bedspread, the heart-shaped pillows. . . .

"I'm glad she's going to give me a chance," I murmured.

I don't know if he heard me. I don't know if that mattered. "Ginny doesn't remember her mother. Barbara died when she was just three months old, and my sister Ruth stepped in. What's one more kid when

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there's four in the house already? — that's what she always told me. She lived more over at Ruth's house than here." He linked his heavy hands behind his head. "I'm glad she's really home now."

I smelled the sweat that had cupped beneath his arms, and the last biting trace of lime deodorant. I laid my hand on his chest, making my fingers tease response from his nipples. I heard his breath jerk in sharply, between his teeth. His laughter rumbled very low, like mountain thunder, and he turned on his side to take his proper role in making love to me.

It was the third time that night. I don't know how he managed to find room for himself inside me, I was so full of the burning, but he managed. He was a very managing man. And at least I got him to stop talking. I didn't want him to talk about his first wife anymore. I didn't want him to talk about her as Ginny's mother. I was Ginny's mother now. I was going to take good care of her. No more mistakes.

I'll make you sorry.

I should have known. God made me one gift — one of His best — a long time ago. You have to learn your lessons, but more important is remembering what you've already been taught. Still, she was only seven years old. I trusted her.

We were in the supermarket. It felt very strange to be out in a public place in daylight, when it wasn't lunch hour. I quit my job when I married him. There is room for only one true occupation in a person's life, and I had chosen mine. It was spring vacation; that was why she was with me.

She picked up a cereal box from a low shelf and tossed it into the cart. It was one of those brands full of sugar and artificial color that all the magazines say is so bad for our children. I wanted only the best for my daughter. I reached in and fished it out of the basket, set it back on the shelf.

"Not that one, Ginny. Pick something else." That was all I said; I swear it.

She didn't move. She stood there in the middle of the aisle with her head lowered, her fingers curling into balls of stubborn sin. "I don't want anything else," she said. So loud! I could feel eyes turning to gaup, all the strangers in the aisle with us, and I knew what they were thinking. Her eyes burned hot and steady like hard coal. "I want *that* kind!"

I just shook my head. It wasn't good for her. Surely she would understand? I couldn't just let her do bad things, or go running wild and harm

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herself. Mothers mustn't. We are very brave and strong, proof against evil, shielding so many souls.

She stamped her foot and made her voice shriller. "I *want* it! Why can't I have it? My daddy would let me have it. I'm telling when he gets home! I'm telling him all about you!"

More people were looking. Nothing weighs so heavy as eyes. I tried to walk on down the aisle as if I were a stranger, too. All the magazines and books I read said the best thing you can do is ignore tantrums, remove yourself. I tried. Then I felt cruel hooks bite through my dress, sink deep into the healed skin on my back, drag the flesh by inches from my bones. Her cries were still scraping at the roots of my eyes, when the pull grew too hard to resist, and I had to stop and turn.

Then I saw. I *really* saw what I should have known all along: her eyes. The curse and the evil in her eyes.

She pulled me back by her power and beat me down, right there in the market for people to see — if they could. I knew what would happen if I didn't give in. Hadn't she told me as much? There was too much at stake to fight her, and I admit it — I was afraid, at first. That is my shame, to be so fainthearted. What hasn't it cost me?

I let her have the cereal she wanted, even though it meant that he raised his voice to me later, when he saw it in the pantry. Didn't I know how children test authority? Didn't I care what his daughter ate? His daughter. I did what I could not to smile when he owned all of her. She was none of mine. Good children do not question, but obey. I had been a fool to call myself her mother. *Flee evil.* At least now I knew where the line was drawn. That didn't mean I still couldn't have all I needed under this roof, for as long as I lived.

I was a fool. I never thought that she might want to have it otherwise. She had the power to make it so. She had the gift of the eye.

That was only the beginning. She would not eat the meals I cooked for her. She found fault in everything I said or did. When I went to empty out her dirty laundry hamper in the hall, I found that she had stuffed the heart-shaped pillows from her bed inside, torn off the eyelet trim I had hand-sewn, and ripped out part of the stuffing. I mended them. I never said a word.

That was not her wish, my silence. She tried provoking me at every turn. At the dinner table, she turned even more sullen. I was at a loss

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to understand it. Hadn't I given her her way in everything? She had only to say a word, and I bent the way her breath blew. Everything carries a price and payment, you see. I was only waiting for what I needed. If I could purchase it just for bearing the weight of her eye, it would come cheaply.

I underestimated her mightily, stupidly. The gift of the eye pierces deeper than any doctor's needle. Fires ride high along the invisible line of power it slashes through honest air. Fire burns and scours all to ashes, which are clean of evil, but barren.

Barren.

I could not suspect the great wrong she did to me through her gift because there were so many smaller ones. God was testing me; that was all I thought. *I'll make you sorry.* Didn't she try. I forgot to mail important letters, and he scolded me. One of my favorite earrings was lost, a diamond. The night he sent her to sleep at his sister's house so that we could go out to dinner and a show, the high heel of my shoe snapped, and I twisted my ankle badly. He made us frozen dinners, and we watched television, but I could feel him blaming me for cheating him of a treat. He never suggested we make up for it by going out another night. She fixed me with the power of the eye, and I became a clumsy creature in my own kitchen. Roasts dried to leather in the oven; vegetables boiled down to pebbles in the pot. If anyone would have given me a dime for every quart of milk that soured before its time, I would be wealthy.

He blamed me again. Where was my mind wandering? How could I be so careless? Useless to tell him the truth; he would never understand. And if I did tell, worse would have happened. I knew that much. Even if I didn't know, I could have read it in her eyes.

One morning she was sick and couldn't go to school. He left us alone in the house together all day. If God had gifted me with a better brain, I might have come up with some excuse to prevent his leaving for work. Perhaps I could have said that I was sick, too, but good ideas always come to me too late. Things forever happened to me that I never caused. He told me to take good care of his little girl, and he went away.

I sat at the breakfast table, cradling my coffee cup until it was quite cold. I could hear her tossing and turning in her bed upstairs, while light poured in through the yellow curtains I had made for her myself. She never made me take them down, but the pillows were gone. I never did find where she put them the second time. The little television set on the

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kitchen counter showed a postage-stamp world where silver-folk smiled and lived safe behind the glass. I tried to will the clock ahead to when he should come home.

That was not my gift to have, either. She called for me without bothering to use my name. "I'm thirsty! I want a drink!" She might as well be asking the walls for water.

I had no choice but to answer her. "What took you so long?" she demanded when she saw me standing in her doorway, holding out the pink plastic cup full of cold apple juice. Of course she hated it. She told me so, but she grabbed the cup anyway. Half the juice vanished at one gulp, then she made a face and vomited over the side of the bed. This was my fault, too. Her glasses were on the little bedside table. I never knew how much I valued having their merciful layers of transparency between us, banking the fires, until she fixed me with her unshielded eyes.

"Go away," she said. I should have listened, but I was raised not to leave things messy. When I came back to wipe up the vomit with paper towels and a bucket of cold water, she screamed until I gave up and left the room. On the way out, I bumped my right foot against her doorframe — not hard, but enough to let her snap my little toe. I taped it up and said a prayer of thanks she hadn't deigned to do more.

That night was the worst. Who knows what lies she told him? He yelled at me. Why did I leave her room in that filthy state? Why had I left her alone all day? What was I doing, drinking, sleeping, lazing like a pig in mire?

That was more than I could bear. My father raised us to be cleanly and truthful girls, with no woman's help. As soon as we were old enough, we did for ourselves. Lucy, being older, saw to everything a woman rightly should around the house, and kept up her schoolwork, too. He could speak as roughly as he pleased to me — I still needed him — but I wouldn't have more lies harm my poor father's memory.

"It's not what she told you!" I cried. "She forced me out of her room, said I was poisoning her just like the wicked stepmother in *Snow White*. Apple juice, a poisoned apple — *you* figure out how that child's mind works! You see how I keep this house for you before you go calling me lazy!"

He just shook his head. "*Forced* you?" he echoed. "A seven-year-old baby *forced* you out of her room? For God's sake, Alice, she's feverish and sick and hurting. She doesn't know any way to deal with it but getting angry at someone. You were handiest, that's all! You can't take what

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she says seriously. She *forced* you out. . . ."

And the way he stared at me, I knew that I could never get him to see the truth. I began to weep. "She hates me," I sobbed. "I don't do anything but what she wants, and still she hates me."

He was supposed to comfort me. He should have sat down and held me on his lap to make it right, but he never even came near. "Maybe that's the trouble," he said. His voice was hard and brittle as slate. "Maybe she hates you because you don't give enough of a damn about her to tell her no."

He could say that in his ignorance. He couldn't know the penalty I'd pay — and he along with me — if I treated her any different. There had been fair warning, and a minor show of her power. I didn't need more. But what good would it do to tell him what she was, what she could do to us? Men are blind when God Himself tries to show them any evil in their daughters. Not even my father. . . . So you see, if I told him about how Ginny had the gift of the eye, he'd close both of his and refuse to see.

Seven years old. I was her age when my father first taught me about the gift of the eye. It was the last Sunday. My sister, Lucy, was upstairs in her room. If I turned down the volume on the television set, I would have heard her crying, but Daddy caught me fiddling with the dial, and told me no. I was good.

"Come here," he said, sitting deep in the big leather armchair that was all his own. *"Come and sit on my lap."*

I was very good. You aren't supposed to disobey your father, or God will be angry — that's what they teach you in church. God is a father, too, so you see how it is. I climbed onto his knee, and he opened the Sunday funnies in front of us, raising a brightly colored paper house just big enough for two to live in.

"What would you like me to read to you, Alice?" He smelled of the heavy starch the Chinese laundry put in all his white shirts. He always wore a white shirt to church on Sundays, and he insisted that Lucy and I wear our black patent-leather shoes, even if they pinched. We polished them with Vaseline on Saturdays to make them shine, and left them by the kitched door until it was time to go to services.

"Anything you want, Daddy."

He laughed. The television was still going, but that was elsewhere, outside our pretty paper house. He wound a strand of my hair around and around his big finger until it pulled at the root, then tugged it. *"You're a*

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sweetheart," he said. *"O.K., how about we see what Li'l Abner's up to?"*

It was Sunday, when the whole earth tilts a little closer to God, and there are many miracles. I stared at the comic strip, following along to myself as he read the words and did all the characters' voices different and waited until I laughed.

"How 'bout that Daisy Mae?" he asked me, and while I was puzzling over whether he wanted an answer to that question, he said, *"Whoa, look who that is, coming round the corner. Watch out, Daisy Mae! That's Evil-Eye Fleegle, master of the Whammy. He's going to get you for sure."*

I looked at the funnies where his big finger pushed hard against the paper. I didn't like the look of that awful man. He was dark and small, with thick lips and a bent nose and tiny little eyes that made my stomach quiver. Little lightnings and black clouds played near his eyes. You didn't have to be smart to know how he'd earned his name.

"What's the Whammy?" I asked, trembling. Even the sound of that word made me cold.

My father grinned. *"That's the worst, Alice. That's the curse someone with the evil eye can shoot right at your heart, like a bullet. Once the Whammy gets you, it'll jinx everything in your life, and there's nothing on earth or in Heaven you can do to save yourself once it's got you."*

I spoke very softly. *"I could pray to God."* I looked up, and he was smiling broader.

"That you could. Think your prayer is strong enough to be heard, little bit of a girl like you! The Whammy's stronger. It's bad luck and ruination, as if we don't get enough of that every day. Someone's got the evil eye and turns it your way, nothing you touch'll go right. You might as well kill yourself straight off and save the pain."

I looked back at the funnies. Evil-Eye Fleegle was in love with Daisy Mae — everyone who saw her always fell in love with her because she was so beautiful, with long, thick, silky blonde hair like Lucy's, and such a sweet, tame look on her face. He wanted to have her, but Li'l Abner was her husband, so Fleegle decided to zap him with the Whammy. In the last panel, that terrible little man had his fists clenched tight and his face all puffy and red and his tiny eyes bugging out of his head with the strain of shooting the Whammy right at Li'l Abner's heart. It was awful the way his eyeballs stood out like they were lumps of putty some invisible hand was pulling. You could see all the veins. Black lightning zagged straight for

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My father's gift was to see evil and know it, even if nobody else around him could tell.

Li'l Abner, and if something didn't happen next week to change it, I knew he was going to die.

I started whimpering. I loved Li'l Abner. He was so brave and strong. He wasn't very smart, but he always protected his family, just like my father did. No one could come into our home who didn't have any proper business being there. There's always busybodies waiting to make trouble, he told us. If you give the wrong people the chance, they'll say a man alone's not fit to raise his own babies, and they'll take us away from him, Lucy and me. He told us about the foster homes where he was raised and what can happen to you there. Lucy started crying again, and he sent her to her room, but she was good later. When she and I were the only ones in the house, and people came to the door, she always made them go away and leave us alone. She knew how to speak to grown-ups, though she was just two years older than I.

My father didn't like for us to cry. He gave me his own handkerchief and told me not to be stupid. Li'l Abner was the hero. Fleegle could never win, not even with the fearsome Double Whammy. *"That's how it works in the funnies. The good guys always get what they want, and the bad guys get what they deserve."* He pushed me off his lap. *"I wish it were like that for real."* Then he told me to be good and stay in front of the television while he went upstairs to see Lucy.

I remember waiting all week for next Sunday's funnies. I believed what he told me — he was my father — but I still felt nervous about Li'l Abner and that loathsome man. Eyes hold power. I'd seen it. Once, at dinner, Lucy said something about asking her favorite teacher over to the house for a visit, and my father just gave her a look. That was all: a look. She bit her lip, and the little bit of color in her face drained clean away. Then, in the next breath, she said she'd tell the teacher not to come.

But my father never had the evil eye! Oh no, that's all part of the lies they tried to make up about him. He had a gift, but it came from God, like mine. The evil eye is the gift of Hell. Daddy raised us to fear Hell and flee evil, to keep the Devil and all his works at bay.

How did the Devil come to touch my sister? Didn't she have enough

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power already, without hungering after more?

My father's gift was to see evil and know it, even if nobody else around him could tell. You have to be alert to it; you have to *know* how sly its servants can be. When I was little, I envied my big sister because she had such pretty golden hair, just like a fairy-tale princess — and that was wrong of me, but not *real* evil. Evil is clever, clever enough to trick even a good man like my father just that once — evil is lies. Lucy was always lying. She lied and stole what was mine.

She lied to me all the time. God knows how many other people heard her lies. I never had a name to lay to what was wrong with her until the Monday after my father read those funnies to me. The house was empty. He went to work early. It was Lucy's duty to wake me and get the two of us off to school on time. She shook me awake out of a beautiful dream. I hated having to get up. The spring sunlight shone off the bright yellow-and-white walls of my room, hurting my eyes. Lucy was bending over me, her hair that same wonderful sunlight color even if it was all of a tangle and stringy with grime. Her skin looked like she had dusted it with Johnson's baby powder, except under her eyes, where purple shadows showed like bruises.

"Get up, Alice." Her voice was flat and featureless as blank paper. *"Get ready for school."*

"Get ready yourself," I growled at her. She was still in her nightgown, all stained and rumpled and smelly.

"I'm not going to school today," she said, in that same flat voice. *"I don't feel well."* When I asked her if she'd called our father to tell him, she winced. That was how I knew she was lying again.

My father taught me it's as wrong to condone a lie as to say it yourself. *"You are not either sick, Lucy!"*

"Yes, I am, Alice. I hurt." She sat down on the edge of my bed as if I'd invited her, and curled herself small. *"I pray to God no one ever makes you hurt this bad."*

"You do not hurt! You're telling stories." I gave her a shove so that she fell off my bed and nearly sprawled on the floor. *"I'm going to tell on you at school. And I'm going to tell your teacher to call Daddy at work."*

She bit her lip, then opened her mouth as if she wanted to tell me something, only she changed her mind and shut up tight again. She left my room, and, by the time I was dressed and downstairs, she had breakfast

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on the table and was all ready for school. I knew I'd done a right thing. My father would be proud of me.

But just as we left the house that morning, she turned and *looked* at me. God for my witness, never will I forget that look my sister gave me. It was hard and hot, and it burned through my chest right to my heart. I could feel a fire filling me, just like when a lightning bolt hits an old tree and sets it aflame from the inside out.

She did that to me, my own sister. Devil-touched, power of the eye, evil. Just like in the funnies, only *real.* The Whammy. The evil eye.

It wasn't any of my imagining. Nothing went right for me at school that day. I tore my dress and got spanked for it when our father came home. Tuesday was worse, and Wednesday more of the same. I got into a fight on Thursday, and I had to bring a note home Friday when I failed a math test. I remember my father's eyes darting over Teacher's spidery script and warning me that if I didn't do better, they had foster homes for little girls who weren't good. Did I want to make him more trouble than he already had? Did I want to live with strangers? Didn't I want things to stay the way they were?

I couldn't understand it. *"It's all her fault!"* I screamed, pointing at Lucy. She was sitting on the sofa, reading a book while I stood in front of his leather chair. My shout scared her, made her drop the book. I saw how her face went the color of paste, and I knew I was right. *"She gave me the Whammy! She's got the evil eye!"*

How shocking to hear him laugh like that — just rear back in his huge chair like a king's own throne and *laugh* at me while Lucy fell to her knees on the living room rug, scrabbling after her book. He didn't believe me because *she* was the pretty one, for all that Preacher read how beauty is just another lie. *"Don't believe everything you read in the funnies, Alice,"* he said. He patted me on the head and told me I should go up to my room and study math, but that was all. He didn't do anything to Lucy.

That night, as I lay in my bed waiting for sleep, Lucy came in to see me. She didn't come to say good night. She didn't say anything. She just looked at me for a long time, her shining hair falling down all around her shoulders like a shawl, a fresh nightie white and pink and prettier than any of mine. I was so sleepy, but even so, I remember thinking how strange her eyes looked.

"I'm sorry what I said, Lucy," I mumbled half into my pillow. "I didn't

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mean it. I just didn't want Daddy mad at me for that test."

She didn't say anything, just kept staring. I wondered if maybe she was trying to get back at me, scare me that she was going to put the Whammy on me again. I didn't *feel* anything evil in her look, though. I was too tired, and I was also a little ashamed of what I'd said before. I was a big girl — not like her, but soon — and big girls don't believe in silly stuff like the Whammy. That's only in the funnies.

I yawned and dug my head deeper into the pillow. *"G'night, Lucy,"* I said, hoping she'd get the message and go away. She did — only, first she said something to me.

"You won't help me, Alice. You can't even see what's wrong. Not your fault if you're blind to what's happening here, but I can't bear more. I'll have to do it alone." And that was all. She drifted out of my room like a ghost. I wondered whether I should get up and tell my father that Lucy was talking crazy, but I was too tired. I thought I'd tell him in the morning.

I was having another wonderful dream, when Lucy woke me up, shaking me so hard I nearly fell out of bed. *"Hurry up, Alice, and bring in the Sunday paper,"* she said. The words came out in a hard little string, like gray metal beads on a line. *"You overslept again, and you know how angry Father gets if the paper's not at his place at breakfast. Hurry, throw on your robe and go get it now, quickly, go on, run."*

I rubbed my eyes and made some vague complaints, but I knew she was right. I was a lazy child. I used to love my dreams. I did as she said, and she even helped me on with my scuffy slippers and my yellow robe, dragged me to the bedroom door, hustling me down the stairs. The house smelled funny; different. Like that storage closet down cellar where Daddy kept paint and turpentine and thinner, or like the garage, maybe, but Lucy had me out the kitchen door before I could fix on why that sneezy smell should be everywhere this morning.

It was dark out and cold. I wondered where the sun was, if I'd slept so late. Drowsiness blurred my mind as well as my eyes. Maybe it was going to rain today, I thought.

The delivery boy always left the Sunday paper in our mailbox across the street from the house, because it was too heavy to heave onto the porch neatly. I opened the box, but there was nothing inside. I was fully awake at last. I remembered going out the kitchen door and not seeing two pairs of black, Vaseline-shiny patent-leather shoes waiting for Lucy and

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me to put them on and go to church. If today was Sunday, why weren't our shoes—?"

Behind me I heard something like the noise a hound makes when he snorts to clear confusing scents from his nose. *Vhoof!* — like that — and two of the upper windows on the side of our house spewed flames. They jumped from the shattered frames, clambered quickly onto the shingled roof. A little ridge of fire ran across the storm gutters, and more flames danced behind the windowpanes facing the street.

I hugged my arms tight around me and screamed. The house stared back at me, all fire behind the windowpanes still left entire. Doors opened up and down our street. I heard dogs barking. The wind blew sparks, whipped the flames higher. I ran back toward the house to save him, but some stupid woman from next door was there to grab me and drag me back from my own porch. I yelled louder, kicked, wailed, shrieked for someone to go in and find him, bring him out, for the love of God, Daddy, *Daddy*—!

I lunged against that woman's grasping hands like a dog trying to choke itself at the end of its chain. God witness, I never even knew her name, but I hated her with a purity that was like the white-hot glow of iron in the forge. I hated her, and I loved him, and nothing on this earth nor all the fires under it was going to hold me away. I lunged toward the fire so powerfully, flesh and soul, that my vision blurred and I thought I saw Lucy standing before me. Her hair streamed out on the wind, all yellow flame, and her lips were curved into a smile that finally gave face and words to her greatest sin.

Love him all you like, little Alice. You know I am the only one he truly loves; not you. Her body twirled in a spindle of sparks. She was the fire, so bright and strong and lovely. *It is me he loves, never you. Never you.*

I felt rage burst from my throat in words no good child ever should know. Tongue and teeth, lips and throat, hate burned me out alive. Tears washed Lucy's apparition away. My eyes gritted shut on ashes. Dimly, from a great distance, I heard sirens coming near. But they would be too late, too late to save him! Never again would I have the chance, the power to show him once and for all that I loved him as she never could. I had to get free. No matter the cost to me, I had to, even to the payment of my soul.

You pay what you must, if you want a thing so badly. He taught us that. I called on God, and was answered.

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So simple, the coming of a miracle. I heard a sudden cry of pain and anger from the wicked woman holding me. Her hands let me go. I almost fell on my face, stumbling forward, up the steps, into the house. A wall of heat and fire slammed me back; another pushed me forward. I tried to go on, but there was pain. I have said I am a coward. As I stood there on the threshold, hesitant, wild with fear and love and grief, my fire died. The men from the fire trucks surged up the steps, and I could do nothing but weep as the first of them carried me away. The back of my yellow robe and my nightgown were flakes of char.

This is the lesson I learned that night, when the house roared into flames and they found him dead in his bed next morning: Heed warnings. They are a gift. My father ignored the one I gave him, and he died. That was not the worst of it. They tried to keep things from me; but in my hospital bed, I could overhear what the nurses said to keep the reporters' interest on them, off me. I could read the papers.

The gift of the eye is the gift of evil, and evil is lies. His love was not enough for my sister. She would have his life, too, and his memory. There was no doubt who stabbed him dead as he slept, who strewed our house with flammables and set the fires, who died with face and lungs smoke-black, without trying to escape her own crime. But to leave such lies behind!

They found them when they opened the fireproof box where Daddy kept important papers. The combination on it was her birthday, not mine. Did he tell her? Did she guess? Not even that proof of his love would satisfy her. She had to leave such evil written about him, so untrue, so impossible and wicked, that when I read the words they reprinted in the papers, I felt *my* gift rising in me again with the sweet cleansing purity of its first coming. It sprouted like wings from my spine beneath the bandages and dashed crackling down the length of the mattress.

They said they saved me. I might have died in that small fire, though the only new singes they found were on my back. Certainly I had reopened the old burns. No one could say how it started. How could they know the truth? I never told. *A fire of unknown origin, spontaneous combustion*— Why so many words to say *gift, miracle!* Yet we must learn to rule our gifts, to shape what God grants us as we shape our lives. They watched over me carefully until I was healed, but I never gave them the privilege of seeing a miracle manifest again. They believed Lucy's damnable lies about my father; they were my enemies.

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You must not waste gifts. Whether it is something as trivial as a little throw pillow for your bed or a power from God Himself, you must not treat it carelessly. In all the foster homes that held me, no one knew. Would they have treated me better, knowing? Once I was tempted, if only to stop their pity, but when I heard *why* they whispered about how sorry they felt for me — not because I'd lost him, but because I'd ever had him for my father! Oh, the fools. They deserved their ignorance.

Heed warnings. I should have done better by such a dear-bought lesson. *You'd better be nice to me, or I'll make you sorry.* What could be more honest than that?

So I bore with her wickedness. We three shared a roof, and he and I a bed, but nothing more. And I waited. You see, God will repay. My father's life was squandered, but because he was a good man, he was promised new life. I heard Preacher say this was God's own word. How? Preacher never said, but I was clever enough to imagine. There is but one path for us to take into this world, out of the belly of a woman. Who better than I to be the gateway of his return? I loved him. I knew this would be so. When I mastered my gift — when I could sing fire subject to my will, direct it where I liked — I realized why I was so blessed. It was more than just God's grace answering my prayer on that awful night of death and lies; it was part and portion of His greater purpose, His vow that He would repay.

Payment of good for evil; that is God's will. The evil child had struck her father down, but the good child should return his soul to life. That was the true fire in me, his sleeping soul. That was what I rescued from the blaze. All it wanted was new birth. For his sake I would endure whatever unpleasantness was necessary to restore him to flesh and blood, to pour him from my body into another of my making. Willingly! For only then would people know how terribly Lucy lied. There is no greater proof of love a child can give than to submit her whole self to the will of him that made her.

This time I would have back what Lucy stole. He would be mine, and mine only. This time he would have no choice but to love me best.

I waited. I hoped. I prayed. My womb remained empty. I consulted doctors who told me there was no reason for my barrenness. No natural reason. I turned the aggressor, though I do not think he cared for that too much after the first few times. He would not do his duty by me. He came home late, pleaded illness, weariness, disinterest. A year passed, then two. She watched, smiling.

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And then she went away. He sent her, for a treat, to go with his sister Ruth and her brood to Disney World. It was just a week's respite, and never a thought in his head that he was doing me as great a service as for her. I remember how clean the air was when she was gone. I could laugh again, as if stones had been rolled from my chest.

He never questioned the change. He never knew the curse under which I had been living. He only saw me happy, and it drew him back to my bed. By the time she returned, it was too late. By month's end I knew that I had what I'd so long desired.

Now I could try to forgive her. She was only a child, after all, no older than my poor sister when she died. Children are too innocent to know true evil until it makes them its servants. Sometimes they may be saved.

Late, too late! She came into the kitchen and surprised us. I had just told him the news. He was kissing me, laughing, treating me with all the tenderness I could bear. I was just thankful that my long time of trial was over. I saw her first, glaring at us from the doorway. The kitchen lights floated on the glassy surface of her eyes like bright golden coins. My fingers dug into his arm, silently willing him to tell her nothing, nothing of my joy! It was still too fragile a thing, the new life in me, too precious to put at any risk. But the words were already spilling from his mouth:

"What do you think, Ginny? You're going to be a big sister!"

She looked at him as if he were speaking a foreign tongue. He could have saved us all pain then. He could have pretended it was a joke. Instead he persisted.

"We're going to have a baby." His arm was around my shoulders, hugging me. It was as much of his touch as I would have to stand from then on, my reward for having been so good.

I saw her fists tighten. "No," she said.

He refused to take it for the warning it was. He bobbed his head like an idiot, smiling in the face of evil. "Yes, we are, honey. Just about seven, eight months to go, and then we're going to have a new baby in this house. And I just know you'll be a good big sister to her."

"Her?" Her expression softened. "It's going to be a girl?" He nodded — anything to please her, anything! — and she seemed somewhat resigned. "Well, that wouldn't be so bad. If it's a girl." It wasn't that she was stupid, or even overly naive for her age. She simply assumed that the world would

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always dance to her tune. Other possibilities did not occur to that child.

I breathed easy. Let her believe whatever she liked, so long as it turned her evil eye away from me and mine. But then I felt it on me again, and the soul within me twisted painfully, though still housed in such a small scrap of flesh.

"*Is* your baby going to be a girl?" She was well into the kitchen, close to me, too close. I tried to draw away, but he held me. I teetered on the edge of the molten pools of gold and glass she tilted up to catch me. She would have me drown in her eyes. "*Is* it?"

I could lie. I could make false promises. So easy to do that, too easy. The first step onto the wrong path. I could feel my father's voiceless protest rising from within. Lucy was the one who told lies, not I.

"A smart little girl like you knows it could also be a boy," I said. *Would* be was closer to the truth, but my heart's shame was I feared to tell her more.

Her frown clamped back down hard. I never saw an ordinary child's mouth grow so small and tight. It was as if her face devoured its own features until there was nothing left but her eyes, her terrible eyes.

"I don't want a boy," she said. "All of Aunt Ruth's boys tease me and their sisters something awful. I want a sister. It had better be a girl."

And he was laughing, telling her that we'd see what we could do to accommodate her request, when all the time I felt the ice creeping up out of my belly, wrapping itself in a shell of dread around my heart. *It had better be a girl.*

Heed warnings.

How long before she learned, through her ungodly gift, that it was not? That it was — that it had to be, by God's promise to a good man unjustly murdered — a boy.

And what would she do once she knew?

I couldn't risk that. She was only a child, yes, but Lucy had been a child no older than she. Who can see all the subtle shapes of evil? The wise learn lessons well, and remember them. So many snares, so many awful possibilities for harm to come to him even before his rebirth. . . . I would have to be very good. I would have to show God how much I truly loved my father.

The evil eye is a powerful gift, the Whammy that undoes all good men. It destroys, but first it sees. It didn't take her long to peer inside me. I felt her do it. Soon after that, I started to feel ill and had to spend the

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mornings in bed; and not long later, the afternoons as well.

She let herself into the house after school and went about her business. I prayed to God to keep her far from me, until her father should come home. Sometimes it worked. I would hear her mucking around in the kitchen, eating anything and everything she liked, playing the television set too long, too loud, taking out all her toys and scattering them through the house without bothering to pick them up after, and I would seethe. *Not much longer,* I told myself. *Patience. For now, let her do whatever she pleases, so long as the eye stays turned away. Wasn't it all her doing that kept me barren! Can't she do the same, root out the gift of life in me, if I anger her now! Wait, and let her think she's won. Soon enough, it will all be over.*

When he came home, he scolded me for giving her such free rein. Her homework was undone, dinner not started, the house a mess. Telling him it was the baby worked — for a time.

Then one day I heard her enter the house and come right up the stairs. I closed my eyes, willing her to toss her things into her room and go back downstairs to the television, the refrigerator. *Leave us alone,* I prayed. *Please God, let her leave us alone.*

God hears, but chooses when to answer. Payment for my cowardice came due that day. I had not been good enough, and the wind took all my prayers. She came into the bedroom without knocking and stood beside me, looking down. Slats of light from the blinds striped her glasses, obscuring her eyes. If you didn't know the truth of her, you would say her gaze might have been wandering anywhere behind those thick lenses, but I knew. It glided over me like a shark, then suddenly dived deep, no warning, through all the layers of skin and muscle, all the pulsing webwork of my blood, until it found his cradle.

Black lightning leaped from her eyes, splitting me open. I screamed with raw pain.

She ran away, but the pain remained. I heard her scurry down the stairs like a rat, then the distant sound of the telephone dial going round. Sirens, A house afire in my belly and a whirl of laughing embers with a child's face dancing behind my eyes. Warmth and wetness flowing sluggishly between my legs, a stranger's hands on me, men's voices, and then the dark.

He was at my bedside in the hospital, with her beside him. Red roses

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bent their heads in a tall vase at the edge of my sight. I saw tears in his eyes, though hers were as dry as mine. I knew I would not cry. Tears were too small a sign of mourning to mark all that I had lost, but as for her—

There it was again! Didn't he see it? There, darting out like a serpent's tongue behind the glazy walls. *You can't touch me!* Lightning black as smoke, black as a soul long since lost to evil. He never noticed, though she clung close to him as he sat near me. He asked me how proud I was of her, for having the presence of mind to call the paramedics. He said I mustn't be sad. He took my hand between his own and spoke of how young we were, of other chances. I knew — as he would learn — there could be none.

Let him learn. Let him know where the true guilt lay. Her eyes were on me, mocking, daring me to speak. *The gift of the eye is stronger than truth itself,* they said. *What is God's own feeble gift to you compared to all that we can do! You are only the first we have chosen to destroy. There will be others. There will be a world. Coward!* The small lightnings flashed the color of Hell, and I knew it was my faint heart that had cost my father his life not once, but twice, my fear that would be the death of many more.

Mothers must be brave, or we are unworthy. That lesson I purchased with sorrow, but no more. I sat up in my bed and named her monster to her face, hellchild, abomination! *He* tried to calm me, to push me back down on the pillows. I fought him and flung free. *She* tried to run away, but a word held her, turning the door to fire at her fingers' touch. She shrieked in terror and stumbled back from the flames.

To me. I threw the bedclothes off, and they turned to fire in my hands. The mattress was a wedge of flame. In their vase the roses bloomed one by one into a blazing crown at my word. *Now call His gift feeble!* my soul cried out to hers, exultant. I had her in my grasp, struggling, but this time I was strong in the power of God. My father was dead, but my fears died with him. I looked her in the eye, unafraid.

A new wonder balanced shivering on the point of the moment, a miracle that might yet be. For one blessed breath, I saw her eyes clean of the evil. In that holy instant, they were a child's eyes again, pure, guileless, steeped in fear. I had failed my father, but here was Lucy's own spirit-child beneath my hand. There was a chance to cleanse her, if I were bold enough to take it.

There was no choice. I had been a coward long enough. Very softly,

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I told her not to be frightened of me. I loved her. Very gently, I slipped the glasses from her face.

I touched her eyes.

Now the danger is past; it is gone, done, over. Everyone is safe again, all of you redeemed. I expect no thanks. I know that not everyone can see the truth so clearly as I. I see the way you look at me through the iron grating. Even through cold walls of stone, I hear your false tales of what you claim I did to the child. *Child!* I could laugh. You call *me* monster? You will never learn.

Maybe there are others of her kind too close to you, poisoning your lives with the gift of the eye, warping your sight with the Whammy, the Devil's own touch. You will never burn free of his lies. You will never know where to place the true blame for all your losses, your failures, your despair. If you would listen, you would thank me.

That is unimportant. What matters is this: That she had no one to blame but herself for what happened. She threatened me, and such an act carries consequences. It was no one's fault but hers if she chose to ignore them. I did nothing wrong. I saved you. I was good. You must not punish me.

If you do, I'll make you sorry.

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Long-time contributor Alan Nourse returns with a tale about a domestic argument that escalates into Something Strange. Dr. Nourse now lives in central Washington, where he writes science and health books, a column for Good Housekeeping and an occasional SF story.

What a Place the World Would Be

By Alan E. Nourse

HE GOT HOME that night long after dark in a teeming rainstorm and found Kathy crouched in the far corner of the living room with lighted candles on the floor in front of her, arranged in a semicircle around her largest mixing bowl. She was crooning something unintelligible at a cascade of water pouring down from a spot in the ceiling.

He walked across the room and stared at her. "Just what in *hell* do you think you're doing?" he said.

Kathy glowered up at him. "I'm trying to stop this leak in the roof — that's what I'm doing," she said. "I almost had it, too, until you walked in."

"Six candles and a chant is going to plug that leak in the roof?"

"Reuben, it's a perfectly good spell. It's worked on smaller leaks." She sighed and sank back on her haunches. "Anyway, it's better than doing nothing at all, which is what *you've* been doing about this leak for the last two years now."

Reuben's face darkened. "This leak needs tar and sealer, not some kind

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of idiot magic. And I told you I'd fix it as soon as the roof got dry."

"That's what you told me last summer when it hadn't rained for two months. So now it's not going to be dry again till the Fourth of July."

"So I come home, and you're playing witch over here in the corner, and there's no dinner again," Reuben said. "If you're not putting spells on one thing, you're putting spells on something else. So what am I supposed to do, go out somewhere and get a hamburger?"

Kathy sighed and stood up. "No, I've got some chicken I can heat." She blew out the candles, took them up carefully, and walked out into the kitchen.

Reuben followed her. He made himself a stiff drink and watched his wife closely as she took yesterday's fried chicken and some tired rice out of the refrigerator. "This magic business," he said suddenly. "I'm getting my gut full of it. Ever since you got started on it, nothing's gone right around here. You've got your head full of mashed potatoes, morning, noon, and night. Ever since you started getting thick with that old harpy down the road—"

"Meg is not an old harpy! Meg is a very fine elderly woman with a lot of wisdom, and she's an *extremely* talented witch, and she's been teaching me all sorts of spells."

"Spells that do what?" Reuben said.

"Spells that do lots of things," Kathy said lamely. "Meg says I have all kinds of talent, and maybe real occult power, too, if I can just get over being scared to use it."

"So what has all this so-called talent and occult power accomplished to date, exactly?"

"I unplugged the septic tank pipe last weekend," Kathy said.

"Yeah, after *I* plunged the toilet for two hours. Come on, Kath, you gotta do better than that."

"Well, I used a spell to start the car the other morning when it was so cold and the motor just kept dying."

"What you *really* did was flood the damned thing within an inch of its life, and by the time you got all your candles out there and set up and lit, it was all unflooded again and ready to go. All you ever needed to do was sit there for five minutes. So what else?"

"Oh, I don't *know*," Kathy cried. "Why don't you leave me alone?"

"Because *I* think your magic is a lot of tiresome foolishness, is why. I

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think your friend Meg is a malignant old bitch who needs to be put away somewhere. These 'spells' she's been teaching you are pure mumbo jumbo. They don't amount to a hill of beans."

"They *do*," Kathy said. "They *work*. They're *powerful*."

"All right, suppose you show me," Reuben said. "We'll have a simple test run, right here in the kitchen. If your magic is so all-fired powerful, make my thumbs drop off. Right now, forget about dinner. Just cast a spell and make my thumbs drop off."

She stared at him in horror.

"I mean it," Reuben said. "See, here are my thumbs." He walked over and waggled them under her nose. "If your magic works, just say a spell and make 'em drop right off onto the floor."

"I could," Kathy said quietly. "But I won't."

"Oh, so that's how it is. I see. And why won't you?"

"Because that kind of magic requires a black spell. It's evil. I could lose my soul."

"Your what?"

"My *soul*." Kathy thumped her chest with her forefinger. "When you use black spells, you have to have certain kinds of *help*, and that doesn't come cheap. Meg thinks my greatest talent may be black, but I'm scared to use it. That's why I'm still nervous even about white spells — I have to be extra careful. She also suspects my black talent may be hard to control. Like, if I used it to set a fire in somebody's basement, I might end up burning down the whole town. Of if I tried a black spell to make someone break his leg, I might break half the legs in the country because I couldn't keep the spell in a narrow channel. Meg has taught me some basic black spells, but I don't dare even try them."

"And you *believe* all this?" Reuben stared at her for a long moment, then turned away in disgust. He went to look at the ceiling (still dripping) and the fireplace mantel (an inch deep with dust) and the carpet that hadn't been vacuumed in at least a week. When Kathy called him, he came to the dining table in the other corner of the living room and ate dinner across from her without a word. The chicken was tough and dry, the rice like little lumps of chalk.

Finally, when she'd poured coffee, he looked up at her. "Now I'm going to tell you something," he said. "Ever since you started playing with your spells, this place has been a hovel. Your mind is off in Neverland some-

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where. You don't cook anymore; you don't clean anymore; you can't even manage to get your hair combed once a day. So now we're going to call a halt to the magic. Just cut it off. No more of it in any form. Next time that old harpy turns up here, you send her home and tell her don't come back. If *I* catch her here, I'm going to take the broom handle to her. Now, if you've got that all straight, we'll start right now."

He pushed his coffee aside, took the evening paper from the coffee table, and sank down on the sofa with a sigh. Kathy remained at the table, toying with her coffee, looking at him. She peered up at the dripping ceiling and down at the carpet she'd meant to use a spell to clean that day except that she got too involved with the leak. She thought of Meg and all the things she'd taught her, about the fascinating world of magic that had made her feel like a significant living person in her own right for the first time in years, a world she would never give up now, and that *he* would never even try to understand. Then, finally, she looked back at her husband. "Reuben?"

He lowered his newspaper with a scowl.

"Reuben, I've been thinking—" And she raised her right arm and pointed her middle finger straight at his forehead.

At first he thought his eyes had gone bad. The room seemed suddenly filled with smoke — or mist. The lights grew dim and gauzy, the dimensions of the furniture all wrong. Then it was more than his eyes. Kathy, sitting at the table with her angry eyes and her finger pointing straight at him, was receding and receding. *Everything* was growing smaller — and then he seemed to be outside the house altogether, looking down through the rain and darkness, watching the lighted windows dwindle and vanish. An icy wind shook him in the swirling blackness; he closed his eyes and hunched himself over, waiting—

Moments or ages later, he landed with a *thunk* and began rolling downhill in some kind of soft stuff. He opened his eyes and climbed to his feet. It *was* soft stuff. White stuff. Cold stuff.

Snow. He stared around him in the dim light. He was standing on a snow-covered slope that stretched a mile or so down to the edge of a vast black sea filled with ice floes. There were no trees, no vegetation, just the snow slope and that icy sea. He was wearing a heavy fur parka with a hood, fur-lined leather trousers, and fur-lined boots coming up to his

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knees. In his right hand, he was clutching a six-foot-long harpoon.

For a while he just stood there, then started slowly down the slope. Only then did he notice other figures materializing nearby, above and below and to either side of him. The more his eyes adjusted to the dismal light, the more figures he could make out. There seemed to be hundreds of them. Thousands of them. *Tens* of thousands —

A few drew near to him, silent as he was, but close enough to see detail. Tall men and short men, burly men and frail. Each one was dressed like him: fur parka, trousers, boots. Each wore the same expression of stunned disbelief that he did. Each one held a harpoon. All of them, every one, just exactly like him — except for one thing.

All the rest of them had thumbs.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 41: *In Which An Extremely Nervous Fool with His Credentials Taped to His Forehead Tacks Trepidatiously Between Scylla and Charybdis, Knowing that Angels and Wise Men Would Fear Even to Dog-Paddle This Route*

I AM TOLD THERE is an adage common among members of the 283rd United States Army Band that goes like this: "If you're going to make a mistake . . . blow loud."

Which is to say, with eyes wide, and alert for Bouncing Betty mines, I am fearfully certain there ain't no way in this life that I'm going to pass through a review of THE HANDMAID'S TALE (Cinecom) unscathed. No matter how sanely and sedulously I comment on this film adapted from Margaret Atwood's 1985 (in America, 1986) feminist/political #1 bestselling mainstream-sf novel, out there in Readerland lie in wait a slavering sortie of semiotic skirmishers, disingenuous bastards and crazy bitches, who will perforate me with esoteric and syntactically convoluted-complaints about the political incorrectness of my shallow, revisionist, hopelessly sexist observations.

Knowing this, the best I can do is blow loud.

I begin by stating that I rather enjoyed this film. It is a motion picture I will not soon forget. Of the women to whom I've spoken about *The Handmaid's Tale*, most have had serious reservations. They tell me first that they hated it; and when they see my raised eyebrows they quickly amend the judgment to say they didn't actually *hate* it, but they didn't like it. And before I've been able to ask why, once again they back&fill, telling me that they don't really know if they *dislike* it, but they know they don't *like* it. And then they say perhaps it's the *subject matter* they don't like; but they approve of what the

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movie *says*. And then they sorta bite their lips and confess to being befuddled in some unarticulated way by this clearly serious-minded and important cinematic document.

Well, they're not alone out there on the ice floe.

The Handmaid's Tale comes bearing such a tonnage of subtext, sexual and sociological and religious and political energy, primary source impeccablity, and heavyweight creative intellects . . . that it would give pause even to Hélène Cixous ("The Laugh of the Medusa"), Donna Harroway ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs"), Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray (THIS SEX WHICH IS NOT ONE), or Toril Moi (SEXUAL/TEXTUAL POLITICS: FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY). Imagine with what tremors a poor dork like me, surfeited with White Male Guilt, comes to the conversation. Just imagine.

In the climate that currently exists . . .

What climate, you ask? You want a context digression even before I talk about the film? Hey, I'm only here to serve.

Then let me attempt a weather report using anecdotal materials that sum up the way the winds are blowing.

A highly-regarded academic, a friend of mine, at a major American university (who begs me not to use his name for fear of reprisal), told me the following story:

He was one of five full professors in attendance at a "prospectus meeting," a procedure through which graduate students in English are put by the department, preparatory to the writing of their doctoral dissertations. Something like a blueprint session where the thrust and tone of the thesis is approved. The other four academics were women, strongly grounded in Feminist Theory. One of the grad students was seeking to do her paper on Feminist Utopias. Much of her source material came from science fiction stories.

My friend told me he had a chilling moment of Feminist/Masculinist epiphany when one of the professors idly, casually, offhandedly corrected the doctoral candidate by pointing out that in all of the fictional examples she intended to cite, men still formed a part of each society. "Of course," the Professor said, "in any *truly* Feminist Utopia, all of the men would have been exterminated."

That was anecdote the first. Just to get the wind up.

Before anecdote the second, permit me a moment of personal privilege.

I am fifty-five years old. By the time you read this in May, I'll be fifty-six. Rapid computation divul-

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ges the stat 1934 as my birthdate. That means I was born into, passed through, reached puberty, grew to manhood, and came to this sad pretense of intellectual maturity in decades of paternalistic, machismo-drenched, sexist attitudes. Though I was never a brutalizer of women (as a registered misanthrope I believe in savaging male and female alike with equal vigor), never a subverter of the feminist imperative, I was nonetheless and inescapably a child of my various times, and was as blissfully steeped in male chauvinist behavior as the best and brightest, not to mention the worst and most brutish. No excuse, just explanation. Somewhere along about mid-Summer 1969 — through the eloquent mechanism of Mary Reinholz kneeling on my chest and banging my head against the floor — I was brought to an alarming awareness of my inadequacies in re: the way I thought about, and treated, women. I won't say it was precisely an epiphany; more like a week-long headache that brought the imparted information to mind throbbingly, every time I drew a breath.

But I have always been a quick study; and it began to show in what I wrote, and how I altered my relations with women *and* men; and by 1973 when the National Organization for Women called for a boycott on those states that had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment I made it a policy not to visit, and to refuse speaking engagements in, non-ratified states. (Except, of course, for lectures in defense of the ERA done at the request of, and in conjunction with, NOW.) In those days my speaking fee was close to five grand a night. *Many* such gigs were given a pass. To the extent that when I found myself inextricably committed to being Guest of Honor at the 1978 Worldcon in Phoenix, I performed my duties by traveling to Arizona in a specially-leased Winnebago, bought no gas, no food, no nothing inside the state, and in 110° heat lived out of that damned camper. (For purists who may not remember the foofaraw this little caper caused, I didn't even put money in the three parking meters picketed at the curb outside the convention hotel where we beached the great whale. The vice-mayor of Phoenix — a woman — had the meters hooded as a gesture of support.) The NOW boycott of non-ratified states was honored until 24 June 1982 when the ERA went down to defeat.

And during those years I spent an actual 1100 hours on the speaking platform urging adoption of the ERA. Eleven hundred hours actually *speaking*, which does not take into account the many thousands *more* hours spent in travel to those be-

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nighted venues, the hours flying home, the hours waiting in motels till it was time for the gig, the hours spent at greasy-spoon meals with members of the local NOW chapter planning press conference strategy, the hours spent doing call-in radio shows in receptive places like Salt Lake City, Shreveport, Greensboro, Tallahassee.

The point of waving these credentials: I have never been politically correct. I did whatever I did, because it made me feel good to do it. I did whatever I did because it was the correct behavior for me. But as a certified loose cannon, I was never knee-jerk about the Feminist Movement, which I consider one of the most pivotally important social awakenings of the century. I gave no longer shrift to idiotic females than I did to imbecile males. One does not judge a social movement by its worst, but rather, by its finest.

I did, and continue to do, the best I can with a consciousness raised by patient women of my acquaintance. That is to say, Ursula Le Guin doesn't seem more than mildly embarrassed to be in my company. And though I suspect Vonda McIntyre and Joanna Russ and Suzy McKee Charnas cluck their tongues about me in private, smiling sadly and saying, "Poor Harlan, he's such a schmuck . . . he tries so hard, the poor thing . . . but at least he's not Jesse Helms or Orrin Hatch," I think they think of me as trying valiantly to be on the side of the angels. Which is not to suggest that Alan Alda has to worry about me taking away the championship belt.

Nonetheless, I am a fifty-six-year-old American male, and sometimes I don't get it exactly right. Which brings us to anecdote the second.

Early in February of this year, I had occasion to write some laudatory words about Joanna Russ. In an essay I'd done for another couple of magazines in this genre. And I said this:

"If there has been a woman writer more passionate and outspoken about what concerns her in art and society, who has been more forthcoming about putting those concerns in her work, I don't know who it might be." I thought that was okay.

One thing and another, and I sent that very long essay to both Vonda and Joanna, because I'd promised to send it five years earlier. And Vonda wrote me about the piece, and in the course of her letter she said, "Sweetie, I noticed a couple of minor typos . . ." and she corrected my spelling and went on, "The other is the bottom right-hand corner of page 8, which says, 'If

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there has been a woman writer more passionate . . .' It's clear from name, context, and the following pronoun that Joanna is a woman. 'Woman writer' is way too often used in the 'dog walking on its hind legs' sense. 'Woman lawyer.' 'Woman doctor.' 'Poetess.' Something that's sort of a writer, but not really, not quite. Sorry. It really is one of my fingernail-on-blackboard peeves. . . . Love to you and Susan."

I scratched my head. I've known Vonda forever, and value her not only as a steadfast friend, but as a clear thinker. But I had *purposely* used that phrase to make the distinction between passionate and outspoken *male* writers, and their opposite female numbers. Why was this derogatory? So I called Vonda.

And I explained my calculated, purposeful reasoning in saying "woman writer." Vonda tried to explain the subtext in more specific ways, but though I strained my pea-size brain, I still couldn't parse the subtle distinction. I wasn't *against* dropping the word "woman," but it seemed less specific if the word were deleted. I told Vonda I'd run it past Joanna, and since it was *about* Joanna, would abide by her choice. I was sure Joanna would say it didn't matter, or somesuch.

Well, Joanna agreed that Vonda had made a good call, and said if I could live with it, she'd prefer my excising "woman."

Should you encounter that essay— it's titled "Xenogenesis" — you will see that I dropped the word. Not merely because I wasn't nailed to it, and certainly not because I was worried about being politically correct, but because Vonda and Joanna are my friends and if they, in their more focused perceptions, were bothered by it . . . then t'hell with it. One does not trouble one's friends if they make it clear it gives them a twinge.

But I had my consciousness raised another increment with the knowledge that the current climate is such that you cannot win. That no matter how sturdy may be your credentials, they're yesterday's news and things have changed again when you weren't watching. That if you subscribe to the position of one or another Feminist Theorist, you will invoke the wrath of half a dozen others who read the portents differently.

That is to say, no matter how properly I analyze *The Handmaid's Tale*, whether as simply a movie, or as complexly as a social document, I ain't getting out of this jungle without getting my lumps.

And I suspect that will be the problem for *anyone*, male of female, who passes judgment on the film. *Variety*, for instance, gave it a mostly positive appraisal, but

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thought it was too pompous. High-minded might be a better term.

You see, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a fine film, a serious film, a demanding film, and an engrossing film; even an entertaining film. But it ain't nowhichway a loveable film.

It runs one hour and forty-nine minutes, and you probably won't sneak peeks at your wristwatch, but you *will* feel its boot on your neck. That happens with polemic.

It occurs to me, this far into the essay, that I haven't struck your awe with the roster of talents on their very best behavior in this $13,000,000 attempt to bring the Feminist Dialectic to Kansas, Louisiana, Orem, and Orange County. The film stars Robert Duvall in a deeply affecting performance as the Commander; Faye Dunaway as his ex-tv-evangelist wife Serena Joy, chillingly barren, emotionally as well as sexually; Natasha Richardson as Kate, the handmaid, far more memorable here than in her previous outing as Patty Hearst; Aidan Quinn as the Commander's chauffeur, Nick; and Elizabeth McGovern absolutely riveting, scene-stealingly so, as Moira, the lesbian who befriends Kate and winds up as a party girl for Gilead's corrupt, hypocritical top-level officials. The screenplay was directed cleanly and without tricks, if a trifle Teutonically, by Volker Schlöndorff, who brought Günther Grass's THE TIN DRUM to the screen in 1979 and won both a Cannes best film award and an Oscar for that disturbing allegory.

(It is, I think, no coincidence that *The Handmaid's Tale* similarly calls forth the adjective "disturbing," likewise the adjective "distressful." Schlöndorff is a visionary, and his selection of projects indicates a serious talent determined not to fritter itself. Following *The Tin Drum* he directed *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* from Heinrich Böll's novel, co-scripting with his wife, the actress/filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta in 1975; *Coup de Grace* in 1976, based on Marguerite Yourcenar's complex novel; the, well, *distressful* [if flawed] *Circle of Deceit,* filmed entirely in war-ravaged Beirut; and in 1983, *Swann in Love* starring Jeremy Irons and based on episodes from Proust's REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST. It is often overlooked in the din of historiography attendant on Schlöndorff's status as one of the members of the Junger Deutscher Film movement that catapaulted to fame Werner Herzog, Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Wim Wenders, among others, that prior to 1965 Schlöndorff worked with Louis Malle, the magnificent Alain Resnais — he was assistant director on *Last Year at Marienbad* — and Jean-Pierre Melville. Even his first film,

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in 1966, *Young Torless*, shared the International Critics Prize at Cannes. Perhaps you saw the film he directed for cable of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in 1985, starring Dustin Hoffman, Kate Reid, Charles Durning and John Malkovich. This is a major, world-class director with his eye cocked to posterity; not at all the sort of man one would approach to helm, say, *Police Academy 12.5: Mooks on Motorcycles.)* It is his first American feature film.

The screenplay was adapted from Atwood's novel (and she aptly refers to him as "magnificent") by no less than Harold Pinter.

Want to talk about credentials? Want to talk about tonnage of creative intellects validating seriousness of purpose? This is the most high-falutin' gathering of quickdraw pistoleros since the disastrous 1981 remake of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* assembled David Mamet, Bob Rafelson, Jack Nicholson, Jessica Lange and John Colicos for a cinematic catastrophe paralleled in history only by the extinction of the saurians, the eruption of Miyi-Yama in 1793, and the decimation of the Amazon rain forests.

I am happy to report that *The Handmaid's Tale*, for all its gravity, is anything but a disaster. It is a coin that adheres to the Gold Standard, as opposed to the half-tin, half-cardboard slug most often tendered by the American cinema.

Set in the near-future, it postulates a United States *roman à clef* called Gilead that has succumbed to right-wing, racist religious Fundamentalism, to a decline in the Caucasian birthrate, and to a rise in infertility due to chemical pollution and radiation. It is a world based firmly, insanely, and specifically on Genesis 30: 1-13 — the story of Jacob, in which the patriarch must inseminate his wives' handmaids to produce heirs. This is the handmaid's tale; the fate that befalls Kate (generically renamed Offred) when her aborted attempt to flee Gilead across the Canadian border results in the slaughter of her husband and the loss of her daughter; the progression of events that takes her from the training center where fertile women are bullied, beaten and brainwashed into their roles as brood mares for the ruling male *apparat* whose wives can no longer deliver.

Margaret Atwood continues to contend that this is not science fiction. "Despite its futuristic setting . . ." she has written, "it is not science fiction, if by that you mean Martians, teleportation or life on Venus. Nor is it a travelogue of the future. It's the story of one woman under this regime . . . firmly

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based on human nature and fact."

This of course is the standard party line of all parvenus who come to the genre for their source-material, unashamedly anxious to pilfer the coffers, but unwilling to accept the label. I can understand that. I've been trying to get people to understand that I'm not a "science fiction writer" for twenty-five years. Wearing that badge of infamy means career suicide, ghettoization, dismissal by "serious" critics, and lowered literary expectations. But that's another story of gored oxen, for another time.

The point being, it's a science fiction movie, no matter how much corrective orthopedic surgery you employ to get rid of the webbed feet. And if there is a stick-up-the-ass Late George Apley *serioso* rectitude that suffuses the movie, it comes straight down the pike from Ms. Atwood.

Yet I urge you to resist the negative aura you will certainly encounter in reviews by men and women as intimidated by the underlying dialectic as I am. It is a fascinating film. It just ain't lovable. If you need Bette Midler as Stella Dallas, or Stallone as Rocky, then you'll fidget for an hour and forty-nine minutes. But if you are one of those individuals as rare in this world as intelligible heavy metal lyrics or compassion in a splatterpunk novel, one of those individuals who continues to seek out motion pictures that convey *ideas*, no matter how distressful, then I push at you firmly to seek out *The Handmaid's Tale.*

As for getting the Feminist Theory subtext right in this analysis, let me take the craven's way out by advising you that I watched and now choose to view this movie as being more about the tenebrous threat of right-wing Fundamentalist power in America today than I do about Marxist Feminist Semiotic Autopsy.

This may be the only review you'll encounter taking that position; and if so, it can be chalked up to the fact that in very short order as the film progressed, I came to care about Kate and Moira and even the Commander a little. It was that Faulknerian imperative I've quoted so often to you, that the only things worth writing about, worth the agony and sweat, are "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone make good writing . . ."

And if I can't counterbalance your reluctance to go see a movie that is *about something serious* with the GeraldOprah titillation that there is a message here for every obedient, quilting, dependant wife and every blockheaded keep-'em-barefoot-and-pregnant husband,

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then let me do it in traditional *National Enquirer* style by telling you that this film contains a sex scene or two that will make your flesh crawl and your eyeballs go strobismic. As I said earlier, I'm only here to serve.

Readers of this column have, in recent months, responded to my advisements of offbeat books of visual interest with all the uniformity of opinion to be found among the Saturday morning crowds at an abortion clinic. The level of passion in these letters is, likewise, reasonable and charitable.

That is to say, several of you have made me out to be some sort of Renaissance Man for demonstrating a scope of interest in that which is visually exciting beyond cinema; several others have, well, blown their tops at my "wasting space" recommending books on Aboriginal art, The Lone Ranger, high-ticket limited editions, Mickey Mouse, and other ancillary subjects. Both camps have got me wrong. The concept is *watching*. In my arrogance I persist in believing that too often those who dote on sf/fantasy neglect the non-cinematic treasures that will inform a more sophisticated, more sedulous set of criteria for what is given to us on the silver screen.

Apart from merely recommending or denouncing films, these little outings will (I hope) continue to serve to broaden the cultural view. And that's why I take a few paragraphs to bring to your attention, for instance, something as seemingly far afield as the new Abbeville Press volume THE ECCENTRIC TEAPOT by Garth Clark (120 pp., 119 illustrations in color, $29.95).

Teapots? Has he taken total leave of his senses? What possible connection can there be between *teapots*, for pete's sake, and movies? Imagine my pleasure at your asking!

When the final shot of a film fades to black, and the credits begin to roll, and you get up and put on your coat, thereby blocking the screen for everyone in the rows behind you, what you fail to notice are the names of the men and women designated Production Designer, Art Director, Set Decorator, Property Master and Props. As you shove your way to the aisle, turn your back on those rolling credits, and trudge up the ramp toward a waiting pizza or the bailout of your children from the sitter, you are leaving behind recognition of the guy who searched through a hundred jumble shoppes, flea markets and rural antique boutiques to find that bubinga wood walking stick with the carved ivory wolverine head the mad scientist used to club to death his hunchbacked

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assistant; the woman who located the 1923 model L.C. Smith office standard typewriter with the broken "k" that provided the clue to the trail of who wrote the ransom note; the set decorator who called Paris for an overnight express shipment of that rare Susse *frēres* patinated bronze lamp with the etched blue glass globe in which the desperate diabolist trapped the demon.

Every fork, easy chair, art deco sconce, and orange juice squeezer in a movie was consciously selected by an unsung intelligence to meld with the overall ambience of a scene, an era, a social milieu . . . to win your trust.

Historical accuracy keeps you in a state of willing suspension of disbelief. Let a child in 1945 pick up an issue of *Spider-Man* from 1972, and suddenly your eye begins to look for inaccuracies. Selecting the proper comic book for that scene is as important in its way as having put the kid in corduroy knickers with a Kellogg's Pep comic character button on his t-shirt.

Films that work have a sense of place and time.

Books that inform our breadth of knowledge by forcing us to look at the ordinary in an extraordinary way, by gathering samples of that which we take for granted and giving them meaning by their accretion, are books that serve us invaluably as reversicons, those back-formation dictionaries that list definitions as entries.

THE ECCENTRIC TEAPOT is such a one.

Tracing the development of that most mundane of table items from the Ming dynasty through Wedgwood's 18th century creamware (one example of which predates, with its motif emulating the fossil shapes in limestone strata, a plethora of contemporary sculptors trumpeted as "innovative") to the rambunctious American George Ohr's early 20th century "clay babies" right up to Anthony Bennett's *Dinosaurs Pointing* (1981) forces us to readjust not only our perceptions of everyday utensils, but to expand our definition of what is "Art."

(Consider the pair of Bennett teapots in the color plate on page 68: *faux*-humanoid ornithopods, something like pudgy caricatures of Stegoceras, their boneheads sporting graceful crests; they are reared up on hind legs, their five-fingered hands clutching outstanding penile members that form the spouts. Now, if *that* doesn't provide table-talk at teatime, you're doing Earl Grey and bikkies with the wrong crowd!)

THE ECCENTRIC TEAPOT is a work of fantasy of the highest order. Not merely because the subjects

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chosen to be rendered as teapots are wild and phantasmagorical, but because it shows us that extrapolation is a universal game played more adroitly by some few, much more freely than by most.

And as surely as a fascination with Egyptian cartouches leads the inquiring eye and questioning mind to Aztec and Inca iconography, so does THE ECCENTRIC TEAPOT lure us to a second Abbeville Press title, THE MAD POTTER OF BILOXI: *The Art & Life of George E. Ohr*, whose name I dropped a mere three paragraphs ago.•

This one is hot!

It is cinammon popcorn and malleable flesh like Plastic Man turning himself into a wastebasket or throw rug; it is songs sung by birds with the voices of Mario Lanza and Blossom Dearie; it is the first time you watched Robin Williams work; it is the moment you figured out how algebra works. We're talking warm here, warm.

In short:

I cannot recommend this astonishing retrospective strongly enough. If we accept as more urgently true for the genre of fantastic literature than for any other, this admonishment by Ambrose Bierce in THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY (1906) —"... the first three essentials of the literary art are imagination, imagination and imagination" — then no reader or writer of this form can afford to be ignorant of the work of the man who published this advertisement for himself in 1901:

REV. GEORGE E. OHR
begs to introduce himself
to the Philistines as
Potter to the Push
also
Originator of the Bug-House Renaissance in Life, Letters and Art. Mr. Ohr, like Setebos, makes things out of Mud — and never duplicates. Correspondence solicited. Address,
BILOXI, MISS.

☞ P.S. Mr. Ohr wishes to explain that the prefix Rev. to his name does not signify that he is a preacher. It only means that he is worthy of Reverence, because he does his work as well as he can, and Minds his own Business.

George Ohr was a craftsman-poet, an artist so tragically ahead of his time that during his life (1857-1918) he was rudely taunted by critics, when they weren't summarily dismissing him or pervertedly ignoring him. He died in obscurity.

•(By Garth Clark, Robert A. Ellison, Jr. — no relation —and Eugene Hecht; photography by John White; 192 pp.; 140 photos in color; $65.00.)

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And it was not until 1968, when an antiques dealer from New Jersey, traveling through Biloxi, having heard of the Ohr Boys' Auto Repair Shop, and hoping to find a classic car, chanced to discover a collection of more than 7000 breathtakingly original pots "of unparalleled virtuosity and imagination crammed into barrels in the family attic. . . . While his thin-walled, paper-light pots were labeled grotesque in his day, they can now be seen as masterpieces of delicacy and restraint, and stunning explorations of the plasticity of clay."

Imagination. We speak of it in terms of fantastic literature as if anyone who works in the medium has been touched by the macrocosmic wand. But, in truth, much of what passes for the Sea Serpent Greater than Nations is merely device to fool the senses. It is performance, flummery, derivative posturing. When we are confronted with pure originality, the perfect dreaming, we can tell the difference. Because, like the stopped time in which truly great events are transpiring, as opposed to the mere lub-dub of a moment's caught breath when we are subjected to the will-o'-the-wisps of staged p.r. urgencies, nothing moves. No sound, no distraction; we are gripped and held; and in a truly humbling congress with the infinite, we perceive how much further above us than we'd ever imagined lies the vault of the heavens, how shackled has been our ability to conceive the Great Dream.

Look at any scene in a science fiction or fantasy film in which the protagonists use a pitcher, throw a vase, or remark on the futuristic design of a bowl. Then look at any page of this book, and understand just how far short of imagination has fallen the "futuristic design" of those set decorations. George E. Ohr styled himself an eccentric, but if he was that antic creation, it was only to sustain himself surrounded by people who were more mud than his masterworks.

Like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, the mad potter of Biloxi was "cut loose in time" and if, here's the belated happy ending of the tragedy, his genius did not speak to the straitened proles of his day, its voice rings loud and clear to any one of us "moderns" now prepared to hear. Find this book. It is a lost continent vivid with color and form and soul, risen at last from barrels stored in an attic for half a century.

In its way, this book is as necessary for the strengthening of the eye of the dreamer as a hundred Spielberg *piñatas*.

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Sheila Finch ("A World Waiting," August 1989) offers a fresh and moving variation on a classic Sf theme, the always fascinating look at the sparks of life remaining after the holocaust.

Cyberella

By Sheila Finch

THE BLUE PANCAKES that grew on the kitchen wall overnight gave off enough light that Donny didn't need a lamp. It was late afternoon, but he could see well enough to pluck the chicken. Donny let the pancakes stay. They made interesting splotches against the peeling wallpaper. And unlike the other mushrooms, they weren't dangerous.

He leaned forward in the twilit room. His left hand, nervously pulling at his tangled beard, left a small drop of chicken blood on the stiff hair, but Donny ignored it. He concentrated on the golden-haired woman on the telescreen.

"... and so the Ugly Chickling followed the call of the Cyberpiper, and left Tumbledown Town. And it lived happily ever after on Storybook Mountain!"

The story lady paused, a sweet smile on her lips that made Donny's knees tremble. His nose started to run again, and he sniffed to clear it. He could almost smell the beautiful lady's perfume. She was pretty enough

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to be in one of her own stories. Her name was Ella.

Ella, Ella — It echoed in his head, a pretty name for a pretty lady.

"Now, what do we learn from this, boys and girls?" Ella asked.

Donny frowned. He liked the stories, but this was the hard part. The story lady waited, but Donny couldn't think of an answer. He never could. This made something turn dark inside him. Something inside Donny began to get angry with the story lady.

Today, though, Ella smoothed her tiny white hands over the pink satin gown with all the little pearls sewn on it, and she smiled right through the screen into Donny's eyes. His heart thumped hard behind his ribs. He felt very strange, as if there were water sloshing around inside. He was hungry for something — he didn't know what, but it wasn't food. He could tell that.

"We learn that sometimes we have to leave our nests before we can fly like eagles," she said. "Isn't that right?"

Donny nodded, his breath catching in his throat. He'd never seen an eagle, but he knew chickens didn't fly. That reminded him of what he'd been doing. He pulled a few more feathers out, and they drifted past the screen on the draft that came in under the kitchen door. A drop of chicken blood trickled through his fingers. It had a funny smell, like iron and sawdust and things going bad.

"Something else," Ella said. Her mouth went all thin as it always did when she was going to tell him something important. "The story tells us that when things get *really* bad, that's when you have a chance to find the magic castle. And we know where that is, don't we, boys and girls?"

Donny answered triumphantly this time, "On Storybook Mountain!"

All the people in the stories Ella told went to live in the castle on Storybook Mountain at the end of the story — the Ugly Chickling, Little Red Cyborg, the Three Robobears. Sometimes Donny was sad that he couldn't go, too.

He rememberd the chicken in his hand again, and pulled out another feather. It floated down to the floor.

"Ella will have another story for you tomorrow. Until then, stay healthy."

The beautiful lady waved, and Donny waved back. She faded away slowly till all that was left was the snow falling.

The worst part about listening to the stories was that he always felt

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so lonely right after she went. He always thought about it all over again when she'd gone. He was all alone in the village. It would be nice to have someone to talk to once in a while. Someone to help chase the chickens, or to help eat them when Donny cooked.

Most of the time, though, he didn't mind too much being all on his own, and he was very good at growing vegetables in the little garden outside the kitchen door, and catching the wild chickens that wandered all through the village. There was always plenty for Donny to do around the village.

But he usually didn't roam very far. There were lots of old tumbledown houses under all the swamp grass and the weeds that were rapidly choking them. The weeds were bad enough, but the mushrooms were worse. Once, Donny peeked into a house and saw something lying on the floor with mushrooms growing all over it, oozy red ones like blood coming out of its mouth. It smelled so bad Donny was sick. Outdoors was better. He liked the tall, ropy trees tangled together in the mud. He could climb up their slippery trunks and sit in the middle of all their broad white leaves and think about things.

Sometimes he remembered a little bit about a time when there had been people in the village, lots of people. It was a big village with too many houses for Donny to count. It stretched from the mountains almost all the way to the dark sea. There had been parties, once upon a time, in his village. Donny remembered colored lights and music. He remembered biting into steaming barbecued meat and burning his tongue — somebody putting a mug of something hot and spicy in his hands. His hands had been smaller then. He remembered big hands cupped around his little ones, helping.

Sometimes Donny wondered if he'd been sick, because he didn't remember much else about the time before he'd been all alone.

Donny's house stood by itself right near a road with a big sign on twisted poles that had almost rusted through. When Donny turned his head upside down, the sign told how many miles to Los Angeles. Donny knew there was no such place as Los Angeles. There was only the gray sea that somebody once had taken him to visit before they disappeared like all the rest.

The mushrooms had taken over most of the rooms in Donny's house, and some of them were poisonous to the touch. Unless you could be sure,

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like with the blue pancakes in the kitchen, it was best not to touch any of them. Donny had gotten stung more than once before he figured this out. Now he just stayed out of those rooms. He didn't mind this too much. There was still plenty of space for him to eat and sleep in the kitchen. He'd lived in this house since he was too short to reach the table without standing on a chair. He could take care of himself just fine.

But there used to be other people in the house. Once, before he stopped going into the other rooms because of the stinging mushrooms, Donny found a pair of boots under a bed. They were plain, strong boots, made of leather. They smelled nice, and they'd be good for walking through the mud, but they were much too small to fit a man's foot. And on a little table beside the bed, he found a holocube with a tiny picture of a woman wearing a yellow dress in it. When he moved the 'cube, the woman waved at him and laughed. She wasn't as pretty as the story lady. But something about the picture made him so sad and angry all at the same time that he went and fetched the hammer he kept under the kitchen sink, and he smashed the 'cube until the woman wasn't in it anymore.

When the chicken was clean, Donny cut it into pieces and put it in the cooking pot. It was only a little chicken, so he didn't need the biggest pot. He added an onion from the kitchen garden, and a little salt from the big bag he found under the crumbling shelves of the market. He'd looked all over that market lots of times, and he'd thought he knew everything in it. But then he'd pulled away some of the rotted wood, and there was the salt, hidden underneath. He was very lucky indeed to find a dry bag!

There weren't too many potatoes left, so he added only one. All the root vegetables he'd planted this year were rotting in the mud. He fetched water for the pot and put it on the range. The round place where the heat came seemed to take longer and longer to get warm. Donny understood that meant he'd better climb on the roof again and clear the choking runner-weeds off the smooth gray panels that sucked warmth from the sun. But tonight, rain gusted against the windows, and anyway, it was dark outside already. He'd just have to be patient about getting his dinner.

He didn't really mind waiting, because it was warm and dry in the kitchen, and the worst kinds of mushrooms stayed out. It gave him time to think about the story lady's lessons. One day it was about Cinderella and the crystal slippers; another day she'd tell him about Goldilocks and the Robobears or Sleeping Beauty and the Castle of Cryonics. But there

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was a thread to all the stories, Donny knew, something Ella wanted him to know if only he weren't so slow.

Donny puzzled over this thought while he set the table. Something about today's story wouldn't let go of him. He sat at the table in the watery light from the blue pancakes, waiting for the chicken to cook, thinking about the Ugly Chickling. He had a funny feeling the story the story lady told today had something to do with him.

The Chickling followed the Cyberpiper away from the people who weren't nice to it —

No, that wasn't right. The people left the Chickling all alone first, and then —

No, that wasn't it either. The Cyberpiper came to help the Chickling because —

No.

He rubbed his head hard, but that didn't help. Something must have happened in Donny's village. Something bad. Something *really* bad. But he couldn't get it. This kind of thinking made Donny lonely. His nose began to run, and his eyes were wet, and his stomach felt funny.

Then the chicken was ready, so he had to stop thinking and eat. And after that, it was time to curl up in his sleeping bag on the table, away from any poisonous mushrooms that might creep in under the door during the night when the kitchen cooled off. Donny went to sleep.

Three things were different about the next day.

The first was that when Donny woke up, thin sunlight striped the kitchen floor and sparkled all over the faded wallpaper. The second was he still felt bad about all the people disappearing from the village.

The third different thing was that the story lady didn't come on Donny's telescreen to tell him another story as she'd promised.

He waited and waited, hunched in his chair in front of the screen until long after it was dark again, but she never came. All he saw was the snow swirling around.

Donny couldn't sleep. He stared out the window at the night. The big moon wasn't up yet, so Donny could see the string of small moons tumbling over the sky, in and out of the blowing rain clouds. "Man-made moons," somebody told him a long time ago. Who? He couldn't remember. But it was a silly thing to say anyway, as if they'd thought Donny was so slow he'd believe anything. The moons reminded him of the string of

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glistening crystal beads the story lady wore. He never once thought she'd disappear, too, just like everybody else.

When she didn't come back on the second day, or the one after that, Donny knew he had to do something. He stood in his doorway in gray weather, sneezing. Thinking about the story lady started the sloshy, itchy feeling inside again. He just couldn't believe that such a nice lady would go away without telling him good-bye. He frowned, trying to remember exactly what she'd said.

Yes, she *had* promised another story. Donny was sure of it. What could have stopped her from keeping her promise?

Cinderella had to run away from the Prince—

But that was different. So maybe it was like when the Cyberpiper took the Chickling home—

Or—

Too hard to figure the puzzle out! Donny thought of something else. What could he do about it?

Suddenly he heard her voice in his head: *When things get really bad, that's when we have a chance.* It was so clear, he whirled around, all excited, expecting to see Ella smiling at him from the telescreen. But all he saw was the snow again.

Then Donny thought of something useful. She'd told him what to do already. Didn't the princes in her stories always go searching and searching until they found the princess? Of course, there wasn't a real Cinderella for him to find. He wasn't too dumb to know that! But the story lady was pretty enough to be a princess herself. He must go searching for the story lady.

All that thinking brought on a bout of sneezing and nose watering. It was awhile before he thought of the next thing. Prince Charming tested for the right Cinderella with a tiny slipper. Donny didn't have a slipper, not even a large one. But he did have a pair of small boots.

He fetched the boots from the kitchen closet. They were dusty and old-looking, the soles wearing thin in places. Donny felt ashamed. How could he offer boots like these to the story lady? She'd laugh at him.

The dark thing inside him didn't like to be laughed at.

She wouldn't laugh at him. She'd understand. And if she did laugh, well, then he'd—

Well—

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Donny decided to think about that later.

He put the boots in a backpack from the same closet. He added a change of clothes, a knife, a length of rope, and the sleeping bag rolled very small. He wrapped up the remains of the boiled chicken, a slab of biscuit-bread, the last of the turnips and potatoes, and put them in the backpack, too. Water wouldn't be a problem. Lots of it all over the place. "Too much!" somebody had said. He couldn't remember who had said this, but it was true. He pulled on his own boots and a heavy, synthfur-lined parka.

Time to set out. Which direction to take? Donny gazed up and down the road. Once, somebody had taken him to the sea, and they had gone out in a boat to catch fish. The boats had to be flat-bottomed, somebody had told him — the same one? — so they could skim over the drowned houses.

But the sea wasn't where the story lady lived.

Something fluttered at the back of his mind like a trapped moth. The story lady lived in a place where it was always snowing. He saw it on his telescreen often enough. He could figure it out now. She lived on Storybook Mountain, too!

Delighted, Donny danced around the kitchen, whirling the heavy backpack. Then he set off toward the mountain.

RAIN SLEETED across the broken road as Donny limped over the rise of hills. He turned up the collar of the parka, but water continued to drip down his neck anyway. He'd been walking since the first light of day, and he was tired. His boots had rubbed blisters on his heels. The road was heavily overgrown with moldy-weed and stringvine and broad-leaved stinkbush. He walked as far away as possible from the stinkweed, because the smell of its flowers made him feel sick. Dim blue-green splotches under new stands of swamp trees and on the sides of tumbled boulders showed where the mushrooms were taking hold. He went carefully around these places, too.

He was hungry again, but he'd finished up the cold chicken when he stopped to rest at midday. The root vegetables needed to be boiled before he could get his teeth into them. No chance of making a fire in this rain. If he hadn't been so excited about setting out to find the story lady, he would've thought of that and boiled them ahead of time at home.

He was disappointed to see that beyond the ridge he'd just climbed,

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another set of hills loomed. After that, perhaps there'd be another, and another—

No snow on any of them. And daylight was draining rapidly out of the cloudy sky.

A large gray boulder caught his eye. It looked clean enough, just mosses growing on it, no mushrooms. He plopped down on it and let the heavy backpack slip onto the wet grass. His eyes closed for a moment.

Since he'd left home this morning, he'd passed several isolated ranches strung along the road. They were all deserted, their apple orchards and pastures clogged with wild vines and mushrooms. At some of them, a few thin, sick-looking cows looked up miserably at him in the rain, but most of the animals had long since wandered off. He stopped a couple of times and shouted at the ranch houses, just in case someone was still there. But each time the only sound was his own voice echoing back to him. Once, a small animal, its fur splotched with fungus, wobbled out a weed-choked barn door. It stopped right by Donny's legs and looked up at him. Its mouth curled up funny as if it were laughing at him. He took a rock and hit the animal until it didn't laugh at him anymore. Afterward he was sorry he'd done that. But the thing was sick anyway, so that wasn't so bad.

It must be year's end, he guessed. The days were getting shorter and shorter. That meant it would rain for weeks without stopping, making wide rivers race down the main street of the village, and lakes fill up in all the farmers' fields. The winter sky would be flooded with a wet gray light all day long, day after day, and he wouldn't see his shadow again until sometime next summer.

Donny sneezed. He was tired and wet and lonely. A dull pain tugged at his chest, and tears came into his eyes. Maybe he was the only person left — not only in his village, but in the whole world. They'd all gone away somewhere — even the story lady herself.

There wasn't much point in going on.

And there wasn't *any* point at all in going back.

So he might just as well go on.

Donny felt better when he made the decision. He pulled the parka tighter about his throat and shrugged the backpack on again. When he stood up, his joints cracked, and all his muscles complained. He stared at the ridge ahead of him as he walked. Broken moonlight flitted on and off across the crumbling road like a faulty light fixture.

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"Stay right there!"

The voice hit him almost as hard as the stone that followed it when he didn't obey quickly enough. He rubbed his cheek, and his fingers came away sticky.

"Said to stay! Or I have at you again!"

Donny couldn't see anything in the gloom. "Are you — I mean —"

"Shut up!"

A shadow peeled itself off the surrounding darkness and hunched toward him. He peered at it, more curious than afraid. He'd almost forgotten what real people looked like. This was something small, bent, and shrouded in a too-big, too-slick poncho that trailed behind it on the ground. He saw the knobby fist clutching a hefty branch. Then stars broke through the cloud cover, and Donny saw a sunken, ravaged face, filmy eyes, and skin eaten by scaly growths and eruptions as if something were tunneling out from deep inside. The stench from its rotting flesh made him gag, and he stumbled back. The creature cursed and whacked at him with the branch.

"Who're you?" Donny whispered, covering his nose. "What —"

"I ask questions! This *my* territory!" the creature snapped. "Who *you*? What you doin' here?"

"I'm Donny. I'm looking for the story lady."

"Say it true!"

"The pretty lady who tells stories on the telescreen."

The creature cackled like one of the chickens when Donny chased them. The little hairs at the back of his neck rose at the sound.

"Don't know the molly, but ain't me!" The creature giggled again.

The black thing grew inside Donny. His fingers twitched as if he'd stuck them into a stinging toadstool. The creature shouldn't make fun of him.

"Well, then —," he began cautiously, his hand still covering his mouth and nose.

"Told you, shut up!"

The creature's tone changed. It gurgled and gasped as if it were in pain. Donny's fingers slid slowly back down again.

The starlight fizzled out like a bonfire in the rain. Now he felt bony fingers grasping his parka. The fuzzy growth on the creature's face gleamed a dull blue-white in the darkness. The stink of decay seeped

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through his fingers to fill his nose. The creature's hand slid around toward his backpack.

"What this? Food?"

"Some," he admitted. "Something for the story lady, too."

The creature sniffed and tugged at the backpack, which fell to the ground. It bent over, rummaging through the contents, muttering to itself.

"Good stuff! Good stuff!"

Donny could just see that it was stacking some things to one side — the clothes, probably the rope and the knife, and the root vegetables. Then it held the boots up close to his face so that he smelled the old leather.

"Yours?"

"Don't take those," he pleaded. "They're for — for her."

The creature thrust its face close to his. Donny gagged. The eerie glow of the growths on the creature's face scared him.

"You ain't too smart, right?" the creature demanded.

Donny looked down at the ground where he could barely make out his own feet. "No."

"But you're alive. Ain't that somethin'?"

He didn't know how to answer.

"Ain't too many around that way anymore. At least, not around these parts," the creature said. "And they ain't long to be so. Got to mean somethin', right?"

The creature sniffed the boot leather and let out a big sigh. "Had a pair like these once. Red they were, with little gold tassels. Wore 'em to parties on the boats with glass bottoms. Used to cruise way out on the Bay — over all them buildings with the pretty spires. Long time since there was anyone to run them boats!"

"Do you know where she is?"

"Who?"

"The lady who tells stories on the screen."

"Don't know what you're gabbin'! But if the molly got somethin' to do with tele, she up there — on Mount Wilson. Net transmitter. If she still alive!"

Donny gazed in the direction of the creature's pointing finger. Two tiny moons broke through the clouds and touched the distant mountains with faint light.

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"That's so far away . . . ," he began.

The rain came pelting down again.

"Your choice," the creature said. One scrawny hand stroked the boots. "But I was a woman once, before all this happened."

"Then—"

"I remember little shoes with tiny straps an' bows on 'em," the creature said. Its voice seemed different now, and it looked to be standing taller. "And silk dresses slitherin' over my bare skin. Hair all curly an' scented nice. Haven't thought of these things in so long! Dancin' all night on the terrace of the Nip-Hilton overlookin' San Berdoo Bay."

"Dancing?" he queried, half-remembering what the word meant, but not quite.

"Yeah. Men and women dancin' together. Pink-and-gold lanterns bobbin' on the water like stars playin' hide-'n'-seek in all them drowned buildings—"

"Dancing!" Donny said.

The creature that used to be a woman stopped to sniff. Then it shoved the boots back at Donny. "Take 'em for your molly."

Donny clutched the boots tightly. His heart thumped. He had to take five deep breaths to stop it, and that made him dizzy. He sneezed, making the dizziness worse. When it was over, the creature was gone.

He felt around in the mud for the empty backpack. He put the boots back inside, slung the pack over his shoulder, and set off in the direction the creature's finger pointed.

He shivered and walked, walked and shivered, sometimes downhill, more often up, clambering over boulders, fighting his way through thickets of bramble grass and groves of swamp trees choked with vines. All around him, coyotes yipped and skirled, and icy rain blew in darkness.

Just before dawn, Donny fell asleep, curled uncomfortably on a flat-topped rock, his head on his backpack. It was bitterly cold without his sleeping bag. When he woke, he was stiff all over. Sharp pain shot through his back as he bent to brush away the yellow spores that had invaded the legs of his pants while he slept.

The day promised to be unseasonably bright, but very cold. Tattered rags of cloud were already blowing away. Ahead, snowy peaks lifting above the ridge caught the first pale light of the sun.

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No castles on any of them. In spite of the pretty day, he felt discouraged.

The creature he met last night hadn't even left him the dry crust of biscuit-bread to chew on. And now there was no clear path ahead of him, and the ground was rough and frosty, covered with patchy snow. His progress was slow. His nose ran, and he brushed at it with the back of his hand. He sneezed, then again, great gasping sneezes. When he got his breath back, he stared at his hand and saw it covered with a fine yellow dust. He wiped it on his parka.

Donny felt like sitting down and crying, but he had to go on.

This time when he lifted his gaze to the peaks, he glimpsed something flashing in the watery sunlight. Whatever it was, it stood all alone high on the ridge.

It *had* to be the story lady's castle.

Donny stumbled over the icy ground, ignoring the stringvine that slapped his face. Huge boulders, each taller than a house, blocked his way as he scrambled uphill, forcing him to go around them. Panting with effort and excitement, he reached the foot of the ridge where he'd seen the flash. Then he stopped.

The only castles he knew were the ones the story lady showed him on the telescreen, the ones Cinderella's prince lived in, and Beauty and the Beast, and Snow White. And the story lady's own castle.

This wasn't a bit like any of those.

A huge white building with a domed metal roof hunkered beside three enormous towers, so thin that at first he thought they were giant, leafless tree trunks. This building, unlike anything Donny had ever seen before, didn't have any windows. But there were other, smaller buildings nearby, and their windows glinted like birds' eyes in the thin sunlight. The roofs had mostly fallen in on these other buildings. On a slope behind the white building, Donny saw a patchwork of gray glass panels like those on the roof of his own house, only a lot more of them. Next to the building, straddling the ground on spidery legs, a large metal bowl seemed at first to be full of golden porridge, as if it were meant for the giant Robobears. Donny blinked and realized that it was only sunshine that filled the bowl. The buildings clustered together on rocky ground, like a bedraggled group of chickens on odd-shaped eggs.

He'd never expected the magic castle on Storybook Mountain to look

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like this. But somehow, when he thought about it, it *did* seem like a story itself. One the story lady hadn't told him, but that she might next time.

There was a faded sign by a gate. Donny could read the words but not the meaning: *SoCalNet, Mt. Wilson Sta.*

The door to the domed building was ajar. Donny approached cautiously. Nothing moved around the house, and his ears picked up no sounds. But his nose — clear for once — prickled with a warm, rich, spicy, wonderful smell he'd forgotten existed.

Barbecued meat.

Donny's stomach remembered with a great pang how hungry it was. His legs took him lurching forward. Horrified, his head regained control and held him, still wavering, outside the door.

"Don't stand there like a fungus-brain! Explain yourself, or I'll shoot!"

Donny jumped. The voice was high-pitched and creaked like an unoiled door hinge. He crept forward a couple of steps.

"Afraid?" the voice demanded. "Shouldn't be poking around, amigo, if you're afraid."

"I'm not afraid!" he said indignantly. He really wasn't. "And I'm not *poking!* I'm looking for the story lady. Is she here?"

"Maybe," the creaky voice said. "Maybe not."

"You'd better let me see her, or — or —"

"Or what?"

But then he couldn't think of anything except the delicious perfume of barbecued meat.

"Well?"

The words tumbled out. "I'm hungry!"

The voice crackled with laughter.

"I've come a long way," Donny said slowly. "You shouldn't make fun."

The laughter stopped. "Right. Come on in. But I'm warning you —"

He rushed across the threshold of the story lady's house, pulled by the rich smell. His eyes saw nothing in the sudden warm darkness, but his nose led the way. His outstretched hands quickly closed around a hunk of hot, sticky flesh wrapped in bread. He gulped it down, then reached for another piece, which he chewed more slowly.

"You said true. You're hungry."

Donny's eyes adjusted to the gloom. A monstrous thing sat in the corner, half human flesh, half metal hooks and claws. Above this terrible

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shape, a twisted human face emerged immediately out of the steel plates that seemed to be holding its chest in place. The thing's eyes were small and shoved close together, as if something had squashed the face. The eyes were a deep, unnatural blue.

"I warned you, amigo!" the metal thing said roughly. "If you don't like what you see, you can leave."

His teeth clattered together. This was worse than the creature in the forest, or what he had seen so long ago in the house in the village. He could understand them if he thought about it. That was the work of the mushrooms. This metal thing had nothing to do with mushrooms, and was more frightening. His feet wanted him to go back out the door. But some other part of him was stubborn, and wouldn't let him run away.

"I came to — to —"

"You wanted the story lady? Well, you came to the right place."

Donny frowned. "What've you done with her?"

"What've I — You *are* simple, aren't you?"

"The pretty lady said go out and search!"

The metal thing stared at him thoughtfully. "Where'd you say you came from?"

But Donny was smarter than that. "You have to answer my question first! Is this the story lady's house?"

"It's where she *originates*, yes."

"She lives here?"

"No. She doesn't *live* anywhere!"

"How can that be?" he demanded.

"She's not alive the way you and I are alive."

"But I see her every day on my screen!"

"Don't suppose you'd understand computer sim? No, guess not."

Machinery hummed softly, and the chair the metal thing sat in began to roll.

"Look here." An arm that ended in a metal claw gestured at the wall. "See those computers, amigo? This is a transmitting station. Used to be Net relay. But nothing's coming over the Net anymore, so there's nothing to relay. Doesn't matter much — nobody down there to receive it."

"There's me," Donny objected.

"Yes, amigo. There's you. And maybe a few more who for some reason

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managed to stay alive when we screwed it up. You're the ones I've been talking to."

"But you're *not* the story lady," Donny said stubbornly. "Ella's pretty. Like — like —"

"And *you're* not Prince Charming!" the metal thing snapped. "All right. I know. She's pretty as Cinderella. I made her, didn't I?"

"You're lying," Donny said.

"What's your name?"

"Donny. But —"

The chair rolled roughly away from the computers. "From?"

"The village."

"Village had a name once!"

He tried hard to remember and came up with a name. "Pasadena Village."

"Nobody's lived in Pasadena for years!" the harsh voice said scornfully. "Elevation's too low. Unhealthy."

"I do — did," Donny said. "Until the story lady said to come looking."

"And how old are you, amigo?"

"Ten and ten and ten. And then some more."

The metal thing let its breath go in a long, hissing sigh. "Well, Donny, it's going to take awhile to get this transmission through to you. In the meantime, you'd better stay here."

"I can't stay here if I don't know who you are," Donny pointed out.

The metal thing frowned. "Call me Cyberella."

DONNY STAYED the night in Cyberella's house because it was too late to go back home. And up here, he didn't sneeze as much.

"That sneeze of yours may be a clue," Cyberella said next day. "You're a mutation. And maybe that's why you're so — different — from everybody else."

Donny had a sudden rush of memory. Children poking him with sticks — taunting — *Yah, yah! Ol' slow Donny!* The dark thing inside him got sharp and poky again and wanted to hit somebody. Then he remembered there weren't any children anymore.

They were outside the domed house, and Cyberella was directing him in needed repairs to the gray glass panels. He scraped thin sheets of ice off the panels, and saw that even up here, wind-borne spores of the mush-

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rooms had taken hold, clouding the glassy surfaces. A light snow dusted his shoulders as he worked, but didn't settle on the ground.

"We had no business making babies as long as we did!" Cyberella said. "We could see the signs — the changes. We didn't want to admit we'd been wrong. That we hadn't allowed for diseases cropping up in all the wonderful molecular machines we'd engineered to do our work for us. *Guaranteed benign forever,* the labs said. Hah!"

"What sort of machines?" he asked.

She ignored him. "The diseases didn't kill the replicators, though, just made them malignant. Instead of serving us, they attacked us. We'd started a malignant chain reaction. But we had a love affair going with nanotech, and we couldn't back out so easy. We figured we'd lick the problem sometime — two years, ten — maybe fifty at the utmost."

"And then?" he asked when Cyberella paused.

"Then the weather turned against us. The sea rose and flooded the coastal cities — everything that used to be the Los Angeles Basin. Earthquakes, too. We thought we'd figured out how to stop the Big One from happening. Well, we did — just replaced it with a whole lot of smaller ones." Cyberella spun her wheelchair to look out over the fog-shrouded slopes of the mountain, toward Pasadena Village. "Trouble was, we couldn't stop them once they got going. Endless small ones do more damage than one big one. Everything went to hell really fast."

Donny considered this as he bent a twisted metal frame back into shape in his strong fingers. "Don't have earthquakes much any more."

"Right, amigo. Things just may be settling down again. Bit late for my kind, though!"

"Then what happened?"

"Even then — replicators mutating and running wild, weather straight out of the Book of Revelation — we couldn't stop! Like old Romans we were, partying and dancing in the ruins while our civilization died."

"Men and women dancing together?" Donny asked.

"Sure thing, amigo."

"Boys and girls?"

"Yup. What of it?"

When he didn't answer, Cyberella went on, "We fell back on the older techs, solar and fusion. Pretended we were still in control right up to the time everything collapsed."

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Donny didn't know what Cyberella was talking about. He decided to change the subject back to his sneezing. "I didn't want to be different."

"But you are," she said, suddenly cheerful again. "Other people's immune systems break down. They get eaten up by fungus from the inside out. You get hay fever. 'Course, amigo, that's just my theory. I'm no doctor."

Donny heard the wheels of her rolling chair screeching on the ice-slick concrete below him, but he kept his eyes on the panels. He still wasn't used to looking straight at her. "What about you?"

"Mostly electronic. Not enough organic parts for disease to take root!" she said crisply. "Done yet?"

He nodded. "But what did you do before I got here?"

"People used to come up, help out couple of times a week. Helped set up the solar rig when the nanopower went bad. Then the fungus got them."

"Oh."

"Lunchtime!" She turned the chair and wheeled back inside.

Donny followed slowly. Now that he wasn't frightened anymore, he could see that, except for the computers, Cyberella's house was a lot like his own. She had a table and four chairs, and bunk beds in a little room off the main one. But there were no rugs on the floor and no curtains at the windows, and, although it was warmer than the mountain outside, it was still chilly inside. He kept his parka on. While he washed the spores off his hands at the sink in the corner, Cyberella set out mugs of black tea and a plate of tortillas. She prepared meals on a wood-burning stove to save the power the solar panels supplied for her broadcasts. Last night she'd served the remains of the barbecue as a stew. She'd named some kind of bird she'd caught in a trap under the three transmitting masts, but he'd never heard of it before. And for breakfast there was a tasty porridge. It had been a long time since Donny had eaten so well. He could almost remember someone—

Singing, he remembered suddenly. The woman in the 'cube sang to him while she cooked.

That had been a long, long time ago.

But when? And *who*?

Now he had a large lump getting in the way of swallowing again.

Cyberella squinted at him as he chewed the tortilla. Her own appetite seemed small.

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"Good food," he mumbled, mouth full.

"Getting scarcer. Need someone who can climb around in the hills — catch birds — find berries — collect wood for my stove. That sort of thing."

Donny didn't say anything.

Cyberella swept the empty dishes off the table with an angry clatter. "Almost time to put out the story hour — *if* there's enough power stored up!"

"I cleaned the panels pretty good."

"'Course you did. But we don't get enough sunshine anymore."

She wheeled briskly over to the banked computers and seemed to forget all about him after that. She lifted something small and round out of a glass box and tapped it to her forehead. Then her fingers flew over the switches and the keyboards. Images swirled and disappeared like ghosts above her head. She made no sound while she worked, but once she leaned to one side and touched a button, and the house filled with music. He recognized it as the tune that meant another visit from the story lady. She keyed it quickly off again.

Donny felt a terrible aching loss, a hole inside his heart where the pretty Ella used to be. He understood this metal woman was the one who brought him all the stories. But he didn't understand how she could be the story lady herself. Tears trickled down his cheeks as he watched, but he didn't say a word.

After a while she swiveled to face him again.

"Did the best I could. But it didn't register much power. I hoard it for the story hour. This mess is worldwide. Heard enough about that before the Net went down!"

"So what good is it?" he asked, sniffing back tears.

She gazed at him for several seconds before she answered. "Could be a lot of kids like you out there. I'm betting there'll be a new generation who can make a go of it, where we can't anymore. 'Course, they won't be much like us!"

She wheeled the chair over to him, but she didn't touch him. Last night, as she'd brought his plate to the table, she'd accidentally brushed against him with one claw, and he'd jumped. She didn't comment, but since then she was very careful not to make contact.

"Look, amigo," she said in the raspy voice. "We couldn't have known

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this would happen. And it was fine — truly *fine!* — for decades. We reshaped the earth. But the planet'll put up with only so much. There're some levels we shouldn't have tampered with. We don't know how long this'll last before the climate settles down again."

"I wish I'd died with — with —"

He had a fleeting glimpse of the woman whose picture he'd found in the 'cube. He'd called her *Mother,* he remembered now.

But there was something wrong. Mother hadn't died. He realized now that the people from Pasadena Village that he'd thought had gone away had died. But Donny's mother *had gone away.*

He didn't know what the thought meant.

"No, you don't," Cyberella said. "We're not that kind of people, you and me. We don't give up so easy. Even when we've made a bad mistake."

EVERY MORNING for a week after that, Donny scoured the slopes of the mountain, collecting late berries and roots, and setting traps for birds. He was very good at trapping birds. But he really needed some long metal pieces to make new traps. The old ones were rusted and broke easily, letting the birds escape.

When he'd done his work, he sat on the rocks and stared down into the rain-shrouded valleys below. He couldn't see the ruins of Pasadena Village from up here. They were hidden in the forest. But he could make out the long gray line of the sea just beyond. The sun didn't come out once the whole week.

He kept thinking he should go home again. But he was smart enough to know there was nothing down there anymore except mud and mushrooms and wild chickens.

There wasn't much for him up here either. No castles, no treasures to find, no wings, no magic rings or beautiful princesses, no happy endings. The story lady's stories weren't true. And the ones Cyberella told him now about the wonderful things that used to be — they weren't true either. He knew there was no magic in Pasadena Village and never had been. It was all a stupid lie.

Donny felt suddenly cold, although usually he didn't bother much about the wind up here. It was the thing inside him getting angry that made him feel cold. The dark think had been very angry with Cyberella last night.

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He stumbled and slithered back down the icy hillside, purple berries spilling out of the bowl unnoticed. He burst through the door of Cyberella's house.

"You lied!" he shouted into the darkness inside. "You always said they lived happily ever after. You *always* said it! But it's a lie."

There was no reply.

"Why did you lie to me?"

He squinted into the gloom, but couldn't see her. Perhaps she was outside, checking the panels?

He knew she wasn't.

Then he saw the overturned chair below the wall of computers, and the tangled flesh and metal that spilled out of it.

He scuttled across the floor to crouch beside her. "What's the matter?"

She lay very still, her eyes closed.

His heart lurched with memory, and he was sorry. "You mustn't die," he said. "I didn't mean to do it. I need you."

A long, awful silence.

Then her eyelids fluttered. "Takes more than a little spill to kill me, amigo!"

He giggled with relief.

"Damnedest thing," she said slowly, her gaze directed to a tangle of computer cables between the work space and the dining table. "When you're a wheeler, you learn to be careful where you leave things. Don't understand how the cables got tangled up like that."

He nodded soberly. "Better be careful from now on, Cyberella."

She gazed at him for a moment. Then she asked, "Get me up?"

Donny realized he'd have to touch the metal claws. But he hesitated for only a moment. Then he took a deep breath and put his hands out. She was much smaller than he'd guessed. She weighed hardly anything at all in his strong hands.

When she was sitting back in her chair, Donny filled the kettle and blew on the embers in the stove to make a pot of tea.

She watched him at work for a while. "Someday we'll have to rig up a wood-fired generator. Otherwise I'll have to give up the programs. The solar panels don't do much good with so little sun."

Donny held out the steaming mug. He hardly noticed this time when one of the claws touched his fingers as she took it. "You don't have

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much tea left in the canister. Then what'll you do?"

"Learn how to brew leaves and roots. It's all in the computer's memory."

He gazed at her, seeing for the first time the clever way her claws held the mug, like real hands. She must have had real hands once, he realized.

"What happened? How did you get — these?"

She looked down at her metal hand curled around the cup, as if she, too, were seeing it for the first time.

"Accident," she said gruffly. "We didn't have facilities anymore. This was a compromise. Has its advantages, though. Cyborgs live longer."

He was ashamed to have her know he hadn't understood what she said again. "They shouldn't have put you up here all alone."

"Hey, amigo!" One claw reached up to touch his hair, and he didn't pull away, although the dark thing was roiling around in his stomach again. "Somebody needed to monitor the Net."

"You liked it?" he asked.

"Yeah, amigo. More than you can know. All that spitting, sparking energy, the enormous jolt of data that kept our civilization higher than a kite. Somebody had to catch the info spurting down like showers of urgent wisdom. Somebody had to squirt the bright numbers back up again. It was intoxicating, addictive. Like walking into fire and coming out alive. You wanted to do it again and again. It was like being a magic spider in the middle of an invisible, thrumming web."

She broke off, aware he was staring at her. Then she said, almost as if she were apologizing, "Did try to come down once. Didn't work. I got sick — the first viruses weren't so lethal as the later ones. But it damaged the fetus. I ran away then. Didn't think it mattered. Didn't think the child would live very long."

Donny felt very cold indeed. He stared up into Cyberella's face. "But I did, didn't I?"

Her body jerked, and he put out a hand to prevent her from falling out of the chair again. "I don't know — Can't be sure — There were others."

"In Pasadena Village?"

"Pasadena was a big city once."

"Not now," Donny said.

They sat silently, thinking this over.

"Afterward," she said at last, "I was ashamed of myself. But by then I

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was in this chair, and I couldn't go back. All I could do was send Ella to talk to the kids like you."

"You could've just told me to come on up here. I would've heard," Donny said.

"Dammit, amigo!" she said angrily. "If there was going to be any chance for the kids who survived, they had to have the right models. Myths and fairy tales that used to guide humans. People've been through bad times before. The old patterns tell us how. Maybe the human race is going to look and be very different after this. But I believe there's going to *be* one!"

He had nothing to say to this.

Then Cyberella said, "Like me to tell you one of Ella's stories?"

"Can you? Without the screen, I mean."

She grinned lopsidedly. "What else can we do to fill the time?"

But Donny wasn't listening. He ran to the shelf where he'd stowed his backpack. Then he knelt by Cyberella's chair again.

"I didn't have any crystal slippers for you, Cyberella," he explained. "All I had were these. Will they do?"

He held out the boots. Cyberella took them carefully from him. Then they both looked down at the emptiness below her waist where her legs should have been.

Donny said miserably, "I guess I didn't —"

"It's all right, amigo," she said, laughing. "Maybe we deserve each other. We're both pretty ugly! What do you think?"

He clamped his mouth shut against her laughter.

"Besides, there're a pair of prosthetics in the closet that I never use. Perhaps I'll get them out again." She stroked his hair with one metal claw. "Maybe — you and me together, amigo — maybe we'll make up for lost time."

But the dark thing inside him wouldn't forget the lonely time so easily.

He got up and went to stand in the doorway, staring down toward Pasadena Village through the damp mist of low clouds. This was a good place to stay. He heard Cyberella behind him, clattering about. He glanced back. She was making supper. He shook his head. Cyberella wasn't sick, exactly, but Donny could see she wasn't *right*. He thought of the prosthetics she spoke about. He'd seen them, good strong metal pieces. They'd be fine for making an animal trap.

Or for smashing something.

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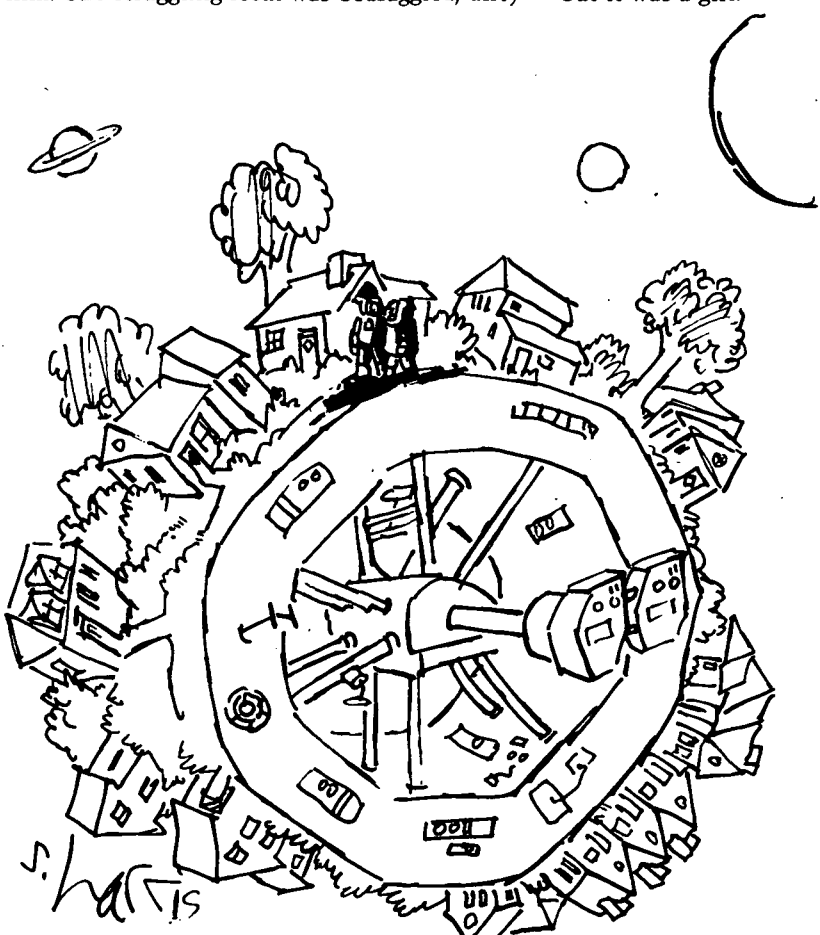
He hadn't decided which yet.

When he looked back down into the valley, he saw a small, thin figure climbing slowly toward Cyberella's house.

He wasn't surprised. There could easily be more than one Ugly Chickling — maybe *lots* of them. Cyberella had said so herself.

And suddenly he blinked. A fresh idea rose like a crimson sun inside him. The struggling form was bedraggled, dirty — but it was a girl.



"We've certainly adapted to this space station surprisingly well."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

AT THE EDGE

ON THE day I am writing this paragraph, my dear wife, Janet, and I have been married sixteen years. It's a tribute to her that she enjoys the situation, for my sense of humor is not only irrepressible, but also intolerable.

I'll give you an example. When Janet is going out to shop or to do some other neighborhood errand, she offers to mail my letters for me. I hesitate, because I have spent a long lifetime in which I have been full of reluctance to let anyone else do things that I can only trust myself to do. If someone else offers to mail my letters — what if they forget, or carelessly throw them down a sewer, or accidentally eat them, or who knows what?

Janet is, of course, annoyed at my evident distrust and makes it very clear that she considers herself as intelligent and trustworthy as I am, and that my letters are as safe in her hands as in mine. It becomes clear, in fact, that if I insult her by refusing to let her mail them there will be marital earthquakes of the most pronounced sort. So I let her have the mail with a fixed and nervous smile.

Then, when she comes back, I cannot prevent myself from asking, diffidently, "Did you remember to mail my letters?"

Sometimes she glares at me, and sometimes she sighs dramatically, but in either case she answers, "Yes, I did." (And I must admit that every letter she has ever offered to mail for me has reached its destination.)

One day, recently, she returned from her errand, having taken with her a sizable handful of my letters, and called out, in a firm tone of voice, before I could say anything, "Yes, I *did*."

I stared at her mildly and said, "Well, thank you — but aside from that, dear, did you mail my letters?"

I was running a great risk, but fortunately she broke out laughing.

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On another occasion, Janet and I were in a taxi which had stopped for a red light. A man on the curb, who may have had too much to drink (or who may, possibly, have known a good thing when he saw it), called out to me, "I want your wife."

To which I replied agreeably, "Fine with me, sir. She's all yours," and the taxi took off.

"So," said Janet, "you're anxious to give me away!"

"Not at all, dear," I said. "That was just my little joke. I would *never* give you away to *anyone*" (Pause) "Of course, if someone were to offer me an adequate sum —"

And she burst into laughter again.

It's harder to laugh, however, when it is the Universe that seems to be having a joke, and a bunch of hard-working scientists are left with egg on their face. Take, for instance, the case of the missing planet at the edge of the Solar system.

There were five star-like planets known from the earliest days of civilization. I say "star-like," because the Sun and Moon were also considered planets till the sixteenth century, and then they were dropped from the list. At the same time, Earth itself was recognized as a planet.

The five star-like planets, then (plus Earth, included in parentheses), are, in order of distance from the Sun: Mercury, Venus, (Earth), Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.

The reason the star-like planets were noticed in those earliest days was, first, because they are bright. They are as bright as, or brighter than, the brightest stars in the sky.

The planets are distinguished from equally bright non-planet stars because the stars retain their positions relative to each other unchanged, year after year, century after century. (Not quite, but close enough so that the ancients didn't notice any changes.)

The bright planets, on the other hand, moved relative to the stars generally and to each other, and did so unmistakeably. They changed position from night to night.

That made it easy to assume that the five star-like planets were all there were. If, after all, there were other planets, they would have long since been easily seen and recognized by their brightness and their motion.

The assumption was wrong. The farther a planet, the dimmer it is likely to be, and the more slowly it is likely to move. Thus, of the known planets, Saturn moves most slowly, and it was taken for granted because of this (and correctly so) that it was the farthest of the planets. Saturn was also dimmer

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than the other planets, though still bright, and, therefore, not as obtrusive as any of the others except Mercury (which is difficult to see, not because it is so dim, but because it is usually quite close to the Sun).

If, then, in addition to the six planets (counting Earth), there was a seventh planet, farther than Saturn, it would be dimmer than Saturn and would move more slowly, and for these two reasons it would be harder to notice. In addition, the sky is full of myriads of stars. If the stars are arranged in levels of decreasing brightness (or increasing dimness) then at each level, there would be more stars.

Thus, there are only 20 stars that are bright enough to be considered first magnitude, but there are several thousand stars that are at the lower levels of brightness and appear very dim to the unaided eyes.

There *is* a seventh planet, which we now call Uranus, but it is twice as far from the Sun as Saturn is and is smaller than Saturn besides. It is so dim that it has a magnitude of 5.5, which makes it visible to the unaided eye but not by much, and it is lost among some four thousand stars that are at the same level of visibility. What's more, since Uranus moves against the background of the stars more slowly than any of the other planets, that motion is the more likely to be overlooked.

Consequently, it was not till 1781 that Uranus was discovered, and then by accident. What's more, it took some time to get it through astronomers' heads that it was really a planet, and not a comet (see THE COMET THAT WASN'T, F & SF, November 1976).

Once Uranus was discovered and its orbit was plotted, it turned out, as decade after decade passed, that it didn't follow the exact path indicated by Newton's theory of gravitation.

It would, if the Sun were the only body that controlled Uranus's motion. The large planets, Jupiter and Saturn, however, also added tiny "perturbations," and these had to be taken into account in plotting Uranus's actual orbit. Every effort was made to calculate the exact mass of Jupiter and Saturn, and just how their distances from Uranus changed as all three bodies moved along their separate paths around the Sun.

However, even with masses and distances all nailed down as surely as possible, Uranus's motion still drifted slightly out of true. Some astronomers therefore concluded that there must be another sizable planet somewhere beyond Uranus, an eighth planet that was exerting a gravitational pull that hadn't been

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taken into account.

A British astronomer, John Couch Adams (1819-1892), and a French astronomer, Urbain Jean Joseph Leverrier (1811-1877), independently worked on that problem. Beginning with the deviations of Uranus in its orbital motion, they made several reasonable assumptions as to the size and orbit of the possible eighth planet and calculated where in the sky it would have to be at the moment to account for the deviations. Both came out with approximately the same answer, Adams being first by about eight months.

But now came the catch. Neither Adams nor Leverrier had direct access to a good telescope, and they had to persuade the head of some important observatory to make the necessary search. Easier said than done. Astronomers were reluctant to do so and we can see their point.

The new planet would be considerably dimmer than Uranus and would be surrounded not by thousands of stars of equal dimness but by tens of thousands of them. What's more, the new planet would move more slowly than Uranus and would be easier to miss. And it might not even be there. Naturally, astronomers were reluctant to waste valuable telescope time.

Leverrier, however, had a break. He asked a German astronomer, Johann Gottfried Galle (1812-1910) of the Berlin Observatory, to make the search. Galle went to the head of the observatory, Johann Franz Encke (1791-1865), to ask permission. Encke was celebrating his birthday and wasn't going to be using his telescope. He therefore let Galle have it for that one night, and Galle got the help of a graduate student named Heinrich Ludwig D'Arrest (1822-1875).

Fortunately for the two, they searched the archives and came across a new star map of considerable excellence that covered the precise area of the sky within which the planet was predicted by Leverrier to exist. Using the star map, they found the eighth planet, which was later named Neptune, in the first hour of the search and rushed over to Encke's birthday party to give him a *real* present.

Neptune was of magnitude 7.8; it couldn't be seen without a telescope, but it was there (see THE SEA-GREEN PLANET, F & SF, December 1976).

Neptune accounted for 98 percent of the error in Uranus's motion, but that left 2 percent unaccounted for. Naturally, it was possible to suppose that there was still another planet beyond Neptune, a ninth, that also pulled at Uranus but more weakly.

However, very few astronomers

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were really interested in the matter. Calculating the position of an ultra-distant planet from the ultra-tiny errors in Uranus's motion would take incredible mathematical exertions. Then, even if they were to locate a likely spot for its existence, what would the search be like? The ninth planet would be considerably dimmer than Neptune, would move more slowly and would be lost among not tens of thousands, but *millions* of stars of similar brightness. And it might not be there. It would take a madman to tackle the job.

However, a madman was on the scene. He was the American astronomer Percival Lowell (1855-1916), who devoted the last fourteen years of his life to making the necesary calculations and carrying through the necessary search. He found nothing, but long after his death, the search still continued. In 1930, the American astronomer Clyde William Tombaugh (b. 1906) found the ninth planet, Pluto, quite close to the spot predicted by Lowell (see DISCOVERY BY BLINK, F & SF, January 1977).

That seemed to take care of everything — but it didn't. Pluto was dimmer than Lowell had expected. Indeed, it was far too dim, and the suspicion grew that it was a small planet. Indeed, as more and more was learned about Pluto, it turned out to seem smaller and smaller (see THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING PLANET, F & SF, March 1987). We now know that it is only 1420 miles across, only about two-thirds the size of our Moon in diameter and only 1/6 our Moon's mass. Considering that it never approaches more closely than a billion miles to Uranus, it is unbelievable that Pluto's tiny mass could have any measurable effect on Uranus's motion. Our own Moon would have as great an effect on Uranus as Pluto would have.

This means that the "residual" errors of Uranus's motions cannot be explained by the existence of Pluto. The fact that Pluto was found more or less where Lowell said it ought to be found was just coincidence.

Doesn't that mean that there must be *another* unknown planet, a *tenth* planet? If so, it would have to be larger than Pluto, or closer to Uranus or Neptune, or both, if it were to have the necessary effect on the outer planets. But in that case, if Pluto were found, why not the tenth planet as well?

As it happens, Tombaugh, after he had discovered Pluto in 1930, went on to use his technique to see what else he could find. He spent years and years studying photographs of the sky to see if he could find any other planet. He made use

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of a blink comparator, which compared two photographs of the same region of the sky taken several days apart. Each photograph was cast on a screen in rapid alteration and, while the stars did not move as the focus went from one photograph to the other, a planet would have moved relative to the stars in the interval, and it would blink back and forth.

By 1943, Tombaugh had examined 45 million stars. In the process, he had found some novel astronomical objects far outside the Solar system. Inside the Solar system, he discovered a new comet and no fewer than 775 asteroids that hadn't been seen before. However, he found no new planet.

If there had been a tenth planet the size of Neptune, Tombaugh ought to have spotted it even if it had been 12 times as far away as Pluto's average distance from the Sun.

Tombaugh finally decided that there were simply no planets in existence that were large enough or close enough to Uranus to account for the errors in Uranus's orbit.

And yet — And yet —

It would be so easy for weary eyes to miss the blink. Tombaugh quit the search because he simply couldn't stand it any more, and there may have been a long period before he quit where it was just impossible for him to give it the necessary concentration. Maybe the tenth planet was there all right, but he hadn't seen it — and no one else has made that kind of thorough study.

Besides, it's not just the trifling errors in Uranus's orbit. There are things much more spectacularly wrong out at the edge of the planetary system. From Mars to Uranus, each planet seems to be roughly twice as far from the Sun as the one that is next innermost. (You have to count the asteroid Ceres to make this work.) Neptune, however, is not twice the distance of Uranus from the Sun, but only one and a half times more distant.

Then, too, Neptune's sizable satellite, Triton, goes about Neptune in retrograde fashion, moving from east to west. All the other sizable satellites and many of the smaller ones move about their planets in direct fashion, from west to east.

That's not all. Pluto has a most unusual orbit. It is tipped, by a considerable amount, to the general plane in which all the other planets orbit the Sun. Thus, a model of the Solar system out to Neptune would fit in a pizza box very nicely, but Pluto's orbit would carry it up above the pizza box at one end and down below it at the other. What's more, Pluto's orbit is lopsided so that at

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one end of its orbit it is twice as far from the Sun as Neptune is, while at the other end (where it happens to be right now) it is actually closer to the Sun than Neptune is.

Finally, it turns out that Pluto has a satellite, Charon, that was discovered in 1978 by the American astronomer James Christie.

This is *very* unusual. Pluto is by far the smallest object in the Solar system that is known to have a still smaller body circling it. After Pluto, the smallest such object is Mars, which has a mass 50 times as great as Pluto, and which has two tiny satellites, each much smaller than Charon.

Indeed, Charon has a mass that is 1/10 that of Pluto, and no other object in the Solar system has anything that large (compared to itself) circling it. Pluto is a fair approximation of a "double planet." The next nearest approach to a double planet is the Earth/Moon system, but the Moon is only 1/81 the mass of Earth. Other satellites are smaller still compared to the objects they circle. If Jupiter itself is considered the largest "satellite" of the Sun, the mass of Jupiter is only 1/1000 that of the Sun.

So here are the mysteries:

1) Why is Neptune so close to the Sun?

2) Why does Triton circle Neptune the wrong way?

3) Why does Pluto have such a tilted and lopsided orbit?

4) Why does Pluto have such a comparatively large satellite?

Some astronomers have thought that there must have been some sort of catastrophe at the outer edge of the planetary system. Pluto, they think, may once have been a satellite of Neptune, and something had happened to hurl it out into an independent, but cock-eyed, orbit. A second satellite may have ended up as Charon; or else Pluto, in the stress of whatever it was that kicked it out, may have broken in two.

And whatever it was may have reversed Triton's motion and perhaps driven Neptune closer to the Sun.

But what could have happened? It couldn't have involved Neptune, Triton, Pluto and Charon only. Some sizable outside body with a significant gravitational pull must have been involved. In short, the tenth planet.

The easiest supposition, perhaps, is that there is another planet out Pluto way, one that is larger than Pluto, and that its existence has simply been missed, and that Pluto, the smaller of the two, has just happened to be discovered by lucky circumstance.

One astronomer, calculating from the tiny errors in Uranus's orbit, suggests that the tenth planet

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is about 1/3 the mass of the Earth, which would still make it about 170 times the mass of Pluto. Its orbit would be a bit closer to the Sun than Pluto's is, and it, too, would approach the Sun more closely than Neptune does at one end of its orbit. Still another astronomer suggests a planet that is still larger, that is about half the mass of the Earth, and bit farther out than Pluto.

Either version of the tenth planet would explain the errors in Uranus's orbit, but whether such planets are large enough to involve Neptune in an early catastrophe seems doubtful. After all, Neptune would have about 30 to 45 times the mass of such Pluto-like planets. Besides, all calculations that would tend to locate such planets have not resulted in their being found. They should be more easily spotted than Pluto, but they have not been seen.

A more radical suggestion is that the tenth planet is a giant, not as large as the four known giants, to be sure, but still large. Some astronomers have proposed a tenth planet that is 4 to 6 times the mass of Earth and therefore a quarter to two-fifths the mass of Neptune. Surely so large a planet should be seen far more easily than Pluto has, but it has not been seen at all.

There is a possible explanation for that. It may be that this large tenth planet has a very lopsided and tilted orbit (one that is much more lopsided and tilted than that of Pluto). At its farthest, it might be two or three times as far away as Pluto and might be dim enough to miss, especially since it would be far outside the general plane of planetary orbital motions, and, outside the plane, astronomers wouldn't be looking carefully.

At its closest to the Sun, this large tenth planet might be close enough to Neptune for its gravitational pull to be significant. It might take a thousand years to circle the Sun, and since Neptune is moving also, it might take even longer for it to get reasonably close to Neptune. Once long ago, it did come reasonably close, and in the mixup and imbroglio, Pluto and Charon were kicked out, Triton's motion was reversed, and who knows what might have happened to Neptune. If Neptune were kicked closer to the Sun, the tenth planet may have been kicked outward. Perhaps, some centuries from now, the tenth planet will come close enough to the known edge of the planetary system to be seen.

Of course, we don't have to search the sky with telescopes only. We have other devices now, namely, probes.

At least two planetary probes have reached the edge of the planet-

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ary system and are penetrating beyond. They are Pioneer 10 and Pioneer 11, and they have left the Solar system in almost opposite directions.

The position of these probes can be determined by the radio signals they send out, and their orbits can thus be described. Every planet they pass has had a strong influence on their orbit, and, at various distances, further tiny influences are added.

It is possible to take into account the gravitational pull of all the planets, knowing their masses and their changing distance from the probes. (To do this we now have computers, which earlier astronomers did not have.) If the probes do not follow the path exactly, once all the gravitational influences are added in, then there must be another gravitational influence, presumably that of the tenth planet, that is not being allowed for.

As a matter of fact, however, the orbits of the probes show no deviation and display not the slightest tendency to respond to some unaccounted-for gravitational influence.

This would seem to indicate there is no tenth planet, but the argument is not airtight. If there is a tenth planet with a very outrageous orbit, it may now be in a part of its orbit so far from the Pioneer probes as to have no measurable effect upon them. Of course, Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 are in the process of leaving the Solar system on still other paths. Their orbits will also be studied.

At the start of this essay, however, I said that sometimes the Universe has its joke. Where does the joke come in?

The joke arises out of the fact that the extremely successful flight of Voyager 2 carried it past Uranus in January 1986, and past Neptune in August, 1989.

In order to direct Voyager 2 accurately, the rocketmen at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory had to know exactly how Uranus and Neptune were moving and exactly where they would be when the probe passed. It turned out that the calculations were very good. Uranus and Neptune were right where they were supposed to be when Voyager 2 passed by.

But why was that? Why weren't the slight errors in the orbits of Uranus and Neptune sufficient to cause Voyager 2 to miss the planets by a substantial margin and to spoil the experiment? The answer was that there were no such slight errors.

The JPL people used only sightings and careful observations of Uranus and Neptune that had taken place since 1910 and ignored everything prior to that year. The fact is

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that telescopes and techniques are much better in the 20th Century than they had been in the 19th, and all those supposed errors in Uranus's orbit may have been the artifact of 19th Century inaccuracy.

Astronomers would in that case have been searching for a tenth planet to explain something that didn't really exist. Isn't that a kind of a joke on the part of the Universe (if you haven't been one of those that devoted considerable time to searches for a tenth planet)?

But maybe it's not a joke after all. In the first place, the search did uncover Pluto and Charon, which might not have been discovered for many years otherwise. In the second place, we might still have a large planet with a lopsided orbit that is now so far away it is not affecting Uranus and Neptune. Perhaps it was closer to the edge of the system in the 19th Century, and it did affect those planets then. And perhaps some centuries from now it will move in and be detectable again.

After all, we still need a tenth planet to account for the outer-edge catastrophe.

Meanwhile, astronomical instruments continue to improve. Computer-driven radio telescopes can already locate astronomical objects with far greater accuracy than ordinary optical telescopes can. The outer planets have strong magnetic fields that can be observed but they are widely spread out so that they can be located only fuzzily. However, suppose a probe is placed in orbit around Uranus and Neptune, and suppose that this probe is the source of a radio pulse that is different from those produced naturally by the planets and is easily distinguishable from them.

The radio pulse of the probe would be essentially a point source and, by locating it as it circles the planet, the planet's center could be located to within a few dozen miles. Considering that the outer planets are 1 or 2 billion miles from us, a few dozen miles represents an amazing pinpointing process.

If the motions of Uranus and Neptune are followed in this manner, even tiny deviations from the theoretical can be detected with great accuracy, and the effect of a tenth planet might be noted and its possible position worked out. We'll have to wait and see.

NOTE: I don't generally recommend books on the subjects I discuss in these essays. Every once in a while, however, I read a book that is so good, so pleasant, so useful and helpful, that I really feel I ought to mention it to the readers. The book in this case is PLANETS BEYOND. It is by Mark Littman and was published by John Wiley & Sons in 1988. Highly recommended.

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Kathe Koja's short stories have appeared in Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine, and she is working on her first novel. This is a young writer with a distinctive voice, and her first F&SF story is a powerful tale about a group of young people who have experienced the ultimate down trip, death, and then come up . . .

Reckoning

By Kathe Koja

DREW HAD BEEN driving for most of the day — most of the week if you counted the stops at Lucy's parents' house — and it was raining, and he was tired. Slap and shiver, slap and shiver, the monotonous beat of the shredding wiper blades was driving him crazy; even over the radio, he could hear it. In a burst of petty rage, he pounded the switch to off, but that was worse, like looking through a shower curtain, and then he had to laugh: stop at the next place, he told himself; whatever it is, stop at it.

SHIRLEE'S. Big, crooked lettering, homemade sign nailed up over the previous owner's more professional effort, but it didn't matter; it was a place, and he was stopping. Ankling through the puddles, into a smell of frying, coffee strong but not fresh, a weak frost of steam on the street-fronting windows. Two customers and a waitress sat talking; she moved with reluctance, palming up her little green order pad when it was apparent Drew was sitting down to stay.

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"Hi," Drew said, trying for sincerity, stopping when he saw she didn't care either. "Can I get a breakfast or something?"

"You can get anything you want we got." They negotiated, and she came back with coffee. Setting down the cup, she said, "Little late for breakfast," and Drew shrugged. Breakfast had always been his favorite meal, and he ate it whenever he could.

God, what a drive. The coffee's heat showed him how sleepy he was, and he rubbed his dry eyes, looking out to the lessening rain and the careless way he'd parked. Fuckin' wiper blade. Have to get it fixed. If Lucy — Shut up, he advised himself, and breakfast came, and for a while he could.

Full, he was even more tired. Driving on was out of the question: he could never make Robin's place tonight. He debated finding a motel, but he had already spent most of Elliot's check, and every day's gas made him more broke. So. Sleep in the car.

Paying, he asked the waitress whether she knew the whereabouts of a liquor store. Disdainful directions, but he was used to that, and, with a twelve-pack cold on the seat beside him, he went hunting for a parking place, somewhere where no one would holler trespass or call cops who'd tell him to move along, and bust him if he couldn't. Shitass little town like this, it would be harder than it looked: a million places to flop in the naked city, but here every inch was sacred to somebody; he would have to cruise awhile.

It was past dark, finally, when he came to rest beside a long dirt road, gravel-pocked like acne, and leading not only from nowhere to nowhere, but so nowhere in itself that there were no tire marks save his in the wet. On the left, twenty-thirty feet back, was a house and something — garage, shed — out back, but it was so obviously abandoned that it took only a second to pull up behind it, stash the car and his sleeping self where it was doubly safe. The grass and weeds were garden-lush there, deep, dripping, long wands bending as he stepped through them to take a piss, hoping his passing would scare up nothing bigger than a chigger.

Back in the car, he popped a beer and risked the radio, but it was either droning gospel or twang, and neither was worth running the battery down. He didn't care, though, for silence; there were too many thoughts in silence, and too many of them were of Lucy.

Shut *up*, but this time it wasn't working, and she came back: gray-hazel

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eyes and small breasts like peaches; big, unselfconscious, toothy smile that came less and less as things went worse. She could love and she could fight, and of the two she was a better fighter; far better than he, especially in the downhill days: coming home from her job at the hospital, and him on the sofa, drinking beer and watching Bugs Bunny on Channel 31, sketches and odd twists of clay in the discard pile on the floor, and her purse slamming down and open, plastic circle of lipstick rolling out as hands on hips and shouted she was tired of it, of his lazy ways and his lazy face, and if only God'd made her an artist instead of an R.N., what she couldn't do with it, not like *him*, nothing but a waste. Sometimes he could ice her back, sometimes laugh her back, but toward the end (The End), it had gotten very tough to do either, and in one acrimonious burst, he had gone off, stayed away for half a week — and, miraculously, he had laughed when it happened, chuckling over the sheer timing of it: a commission and a big one, big for him anyway, some tin-ear band with money to blow, blowing it his way. He had taken their down payment, drunk only ten bucks of it (and four of them were Robin's), and swaggered home, shit-eating grin and all, meaning to *show* her, both ways.

No lights on, her car gone; she was showing *him*, then. Well. He could wait. He passed the time sketching, fiddling with the band's existing logo, doodling till the phone rang: MaryLee down at the hospital, and had he heard.

They all thought he was drunk at the funeral, even Robin; oddly, Lucy's parents knew different, knew his shouts and staggers were the product not of booze but hysteria, grief cranked to where he couldn't hold it, where it filled and mastered him and smothered what sense he had left. He cried like a slob right there at the grave, wet face pressed into Mrs. Dooley's shoulder, and she rubbed his back like he was her own, her living child. Afterward Mr. Dooley took them both out for brunch, and Drew ate three bites of eggs over easy and threw up all over the men's room floor.

Eight months, and still he could taste those eggs. The beer was cold; it made his fillings ache, and that was good. He killed the can, tidy toss into the backseat, sat head back against the window and feet on the seat, staring half at the fabric-peeling ceiling and half out into the dark, where the empty house sat like camouflage, its dark green paint weathered and scabbed to vegetation, its windows so dirty no sunlight could betray them to a vandal's stone. "Coulda been a nice house," he said, popping another

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can. "Coulda been another Tara. As God is my witness, I'll never be thirsty again." This beer was as cold as its twin, but tastier; the second one usually was.

By the third he was almost asleep, would have been but for a pressing need to piss. Groaning, muscles bitching, just drunk enough not to care he was barefoot in all that knee-high green, he stepped away from the car, peed in a long, luxurious stream, eyes half-closed. If you stood away from the trees, you could see the stars, very clear tonight despite the earlier rain, or maybe because of it. He squinted, mourning lost knowledge: he used to be able to name all the constellations, twelve-year-old finger pointing confident authority at the vastness up above. Now he was lucky if he could find the Little Dipper.

Hand on the door, bending to step inside, and a flash, a silver shine like a baby star, but much much lower, on his level, in fact: by the garage, shed, whatever. Someone was there.

"Shit*fire*." Underbreath anxiety, thinking, Don't get your hair up till you know what's what; wishing he hadn't had that third beer, wishing he could put his hand to his big-barreled flashlight in the messy maze of the backseat. He had to look away to find the flashlight, and when he did, peripherals told him the light had flashed again, and this time there were two lights, not one.

Well. He had nothing to steal but the rest of Elliot's check, and, of course, the Chevy — the beer, too, if they wanted it. It would be bad to be ripped off and stranded, but it would be worse to have the shit kicked out of him and maybe more, so if it looked like a smart idea, he was going to pretend he couldn't find his glasses and couldn't see fuckall without them, couldn't see if the robbers were crazy teenagers or men from Mars. And first he was going to wait and see what was what, and do it in the car if possible.

Shine again, much closer, and a definite shape: a woman's shape, surprise, surprise. White, *white* skin, and tall; couldn't see hair or face, but she was shiteating poor if what she had to wear was all she had, poor enough to really live there, poor enough to gladly play decoy to a stranger if she could get enough out of it to buy a new pair of jeans. Her walk was easy, not tense in the dark, a confident twist of her head like this was Buckingham Palace, and she was maybe gonna call out the guards if he couldn't come up with a good reason to be double-parked. And still the

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shine: was she wearing mirror shades, or what? And where was the light that made them shine?

"Hey." A voice as self-assured as her walk, low voice, actressy. "Got car trouble or something?"

"Got no trouble, ma'am." Trying for easy, coming up short. "Didn't know there was anybody—"

Up to the car now, up where he could get a good look at her face, a real good look. Not shades, no.

Eyes.

Silver *eyes*, silver fuckin' eyes like a fish's scales — no whites, no irises, no nothing but silver — and his hand was reaching on its own for the ignition, when her hand, smarter than his, slipped out the keys.

"Calm down." Smiling; he could see her smiling. God, her skin was white. Maybe she was some weird kind of mutant albino or something? Men from Mars, ha ha; Lucy used to say how God heard even the things you didn't say out loud, *especially* the things you didn't say out loud. Oh Lucy, please go away; I have to *think*.

And then he knew he was *really* going crazy, because Lucy was there, too. Really there, not just one of his ten-beer figments; there enough to get a whiff of her: a dry cinnamon odor, ragged T-shirt, standing behind the other with a smile half-happy, half-something else, her eyes as silver as the chrome on his Chevy. Saying, "Hello, Drew," putting out her hand, reaching to draw him out of the car.

"Fuck a *duck*," he said between his teeth, mouth full of loose, sour spit, scrambing to roll up the window as the first woman reached and put both hands on his face. Her hands felt surprisingly good, coolish, soft-palmed, the nails long but not too long, holding his face, gentling his clenched jaw, thumbs just brushing his cheekbones while enormous darkness blew down like a summer storm, darkness entire, the Lucy smell very close indeed. And he thought, Crazy *and* dead; *God*, what a night.

It was still night when the darkness cleared, but he was out of the car, cross-legged on a bare floor, linoleum, a pattern like Woolworth roses and sick pansies. His jeans were wet; apparently death had been unnerving enough to make him piss himself. Lucy sat across from him, hopeful smile on her face, the other woman to her left, and to *her* left, three others: a man and two women.

"Feel better now?" Lucy said, so completely Lucy that, dead or no, he

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began to cry: long, steady ribbons of water, his hands clasped between his trembling knees, weeping to see her there, wearing not the pale, prim dress she'd worn in the coffin, but a Braves T-shirt and a pair of men's cutoffs, cinched around her tiny waist with part of a bicycle tire tube. He cried for that tire, cried to see her here in this crummy place, cried to *be* here in this crummy place. She didn't make thirty, and neither did I, he thought, and cried harder for a minute, then calmed a little.

"Hey," he said, "hey, Luce," and she came to him, sat head on his shoulder like she used to, and he spoke not to her but to the other, his tone mild yet still somehow aggrieved, as if he were owed at the least an answer.

"Why'd you kill me for, anyway?"

She laughed, a genuine sound, and after a second the others did, too, all but Lucy. "I didn't kill you," she said. "You're not dead."

That stilled him, put a long chill on his skin; the flesh of him that touched Lucy pulled back a little, just a touch. "Then how'm I here? How—"

"They used to call it a glamour," she said. "It's a way—" Shrugged, sighed, impatient with the need to explain. "It's just a way to get your attention."

"Well, you got it." He looked down, head cocked, at Lucy. "Are—" A hard question to ask, and the other knew it, spoke it for him, still with that impatient edge.

"We're all dead." Nodding to Lucy, the others. "Me, Lucy, all of us." The man nodded, a ponderous motion like he'd needed half the day to think it up; he hadn't been any Einstein when he was alive — that was sure. The other two women nodded, too, both dressed in ragged red, with red bows in their hair, bows made from dusty Christmas ribbon, it looked like. A mother-daughter act, probably. They didn't really look alike, but then, kinfolk didn't always.

"Listen," Drew said, straightening, his body still wanting to pull away a little now that it knew it was still alive. He leaned forward, part of him wondering, in a distant, musing way, what was keeping him from making one assbusting dash for the door; the same part deciding it must be, what, the glamour or whatever. "Listen, I would just like to know a few things; I would like to just ask a couple—"

"Lucy can tell you all that," the woman said, standing suddenly, brush-

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ing back that long black hair; and it was *long*, and looked clean even though she didn't. "I'll talk to you later on." And turning away, as if bored, beckoning to the others, mother-daughter getting up at once, daughter with a definite Charlie McCarthy lurch, and the brain surgeon last of all, cradling his big hands on what looked like a jar full of dirt. They went into the room adjoining, no one looking back, and at once Drew heard them talking, not about him, nothing even scary, just the kind of aimless talk you talk with a roommate or co-worker. Stone-crazy now, he thought, and the thought did not displease him, nor did Lucy as she smiled — that big, happy, billboard smile; he hadn't seen it in so long. "C'mere," she said, though he was still next to her, "c'mere, you," and suddenly she was *there* in yet another way, the self of her, the body of her, and he was holding her very, very close, not crying now, but feeling as if he might, a big, clean sob to blow away that day by the grave and the taste of eggs and all the days after, all the time spent pushing her memory back and never succeeding. He did cry after all, and she held him, almost exactly as her mother had eight months before. Her hands were gentle, and he reached to hug her back, stroke and soothe as she stroked and soothed, but then his hands wanted something different, wanted it now, and his breath was sudden and ragged, panting on her cool white neck, fingers dragging at the soft tatter of her T-shirt, bending to her lips to find them closed to him, smiling but still closed, her kiss loving and warmer than her skin, but her breath then, not sour but arid, dry like driest wine, a puff of it against his cheek as with her palms she guided his head lower, put her breast to his lips, which opened at once, her nipples like little cherries, sweet as her mouth was not. The bicycle tire snapped in his hands, the cutoffs fell from her bony boy's hips, he yanked his own jeans open and was on her, in her, the linoleum dusty-cold against his palms, the pleasure immediate and so fierce it stunned him, sunk him to lie atop her, unable to catch his breath, and she smiling as she always had, the gentler version of the billboard, saying, "Just rest now, baby, just rest," and he thought that was a wonderful idea, he had so much to say, ask, but he would say and ask it in a minute, just a minute, just let him get his breath.

His back was sore as hell in the morning, and he thought, Man, this seat is *hard*, until he woke enough to see the Woolworth roses and the sun weak through filthy windows, and a great surge of adrenaline threw

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him standing and halfway out of the room, heart a-stammer and throat rich with the taste of vomit. The door, the door, where the hell is the fuckin' *door*? — but there in the doorway, Lucy, smiling, not looking any different, except of course for her new style in eyeballs, saying, "I got some stuff from out of the car, if you're hungry."

"God." Taking deep breaths, willing the terror away. She looked so *normal*, a little paler than usual, but put a pair of RayBans on her, and she could pass for living any day —'

"Lucy." Actress voice, behind Lucy. "Did you talk at all to Drew last night?"

Lucy shrugged, smiled. The other shrugged, too, a different way. "Well, somebody has to talk to him; there're things he has to know. And it better be pretty quick, because he's not looking too cheerful this morning." Brisk, almost pissed. "You want the short form, Drew? While Lucy gets you something to drink?"

"Beer," he heard himself say, a croak like his voice was changing. "In the car."

Lucy nodded, not pleased with her role as waitress, a look between her and the other as she left the room, Drew staring down at his feet until the warm can touched his fingers. He sat down hard, popped and drank half the can in two long swallows, gave a short, spasmodic belch, and drank the rest, more slowly. "O.K.," he said when he was done. "O.K."

Lucy sat beside him, the other across from them both. "I said short form, right," she said, producing from somewhere a pack of cigarettes and a scratched red lighter. The smoke came out silver from her mouth, and Drew flinched, hard. She grinned, blew more smoke. "Pretty, isn't it? I used to spend *days* doing that. — Anyway. You want to know what's up, right? Well, I can answer your questions."

"You sound," Drew said without thinking, "like a social studies teacher I had once. Miz Minch. Minch the Pinch."

She laughed then; she had a beautiful laugh, like a waterfall, not loud but very clear. "O.K., O.K. Drink your beer and shut up. Lucy, you fill in anything I forget, O.K.?"

Her name, she said, was Norah. She had "been here" for almost a year, after her death. She came up out of the ground.

"*Fuck.*"

"Yeah, I know, but it's not as bad as it sounds." Her skin had been

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that glossy white, her eyes silver: all physical evidence of her death was completely gone. "I had a messy end," she said, with such bitterness that even Lucy looked away. She had come up ("come up," Drew thought, the beer threatening to do the same) in the little field behind the house, naked, mute, in a walking coma of terror. She came into the house and found Edie and Darleen, the mother-and-daughter act — only, they weren't really related, had never known each other "before." "Wesley either." Naming the large, silent man. "Wesley came the week after I did." Norah frowned. Wesley was a suicide, she said, hanged himself in his basement rec room after his wife decamped to Nashville with his brother. "Wesley came out somewhere by the interstate," Lucy added, the way someone else might say Wesley is from Pittsburgh. What had led him to the abandoned green house, scent or instinct or chance, no one knew. Wesley himself was deeply uncommunicative, preferring to pass the time by entombing insects in Peter Pan jars packed to the top with dirt, then watching the jars to see if bugs, too, could "come up." Wesley was obviously seriously strange, but Norah said that seemed to be the way with a suicide: Wesley was the least normal, the most dangerous, the only one who still showed scars. "You can see his rope burns if you look," Lucy said, "but don't look."

"Don't worry." He popped the second beer. His hands were shaking.

"Edie and Darleen are from somewhere else, too, but they won't say where." Norah sighed. "Edie's all right, but Darleen's not what you'd call all there. I don't think she ever was, really. Death intensifies the characteristics you had in life, and if you were a mess then, you're a bigger one now. The — the process of coming up is" — long pause — "kind of traumatic. It could probably fuck you up big-time if you weren't pretty stable to begin with. Like the suicides. Who are probably *very* disappointed when they figure out what's up. — Anyway, Darleen bought it in a car wreck; her boyfriend was drunk, but if he died, too, he didn't come up anywhere she could see, or maybe he did and left her. She tells it both ways. Edie died of cancer and came up behind the 7-Eleven."

Drew laughed, a big, nervous bray that once out could not be stopped. He laughed so hard his hands stopped shaking, kept chuckling even as he nodded for Norah to go on. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really am. It just — I don't know, it just struck me funny."

"Right. Well, you know what happened to Lucy." That stopped him; doubtless she had known it would. "We saw her walking around one

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They were obviously not witches, not vampires or zombies or even that old standby, aliens.

night — she was like sleepwalking — and we brought her in here. Since she came, we haven't seen anyone else. Until you."

Dubious: "Nobody?"

"Couple scares, but nobody really got close enough to know what they were seeing. I glamoured one of 'em off, this old drunk guy. Drove away, and that was it."

She went on, through the second beer and half a bag of Cheetos (both offered to them, but no, they didn't eat or drink, thank you!). They did not, could not, roam far — it was much too dangerous; one slip, and that was it — and though Norah was unsure if they could die again, she was in no rush to find out: "Once" — with that great bitterness again — "was *quite* enough."

"You mean to say you both've been here since, ever since —"

"Ever since we got here." Lucy's smile was somber. "Not much in the way of entertainment, but then again, nobody's tried to burn us as witches, either."

They were obviously not witches, not vampires or zombies or even that good old standby, aliens — Drew's own knowledge of Lucy had proved that to him. "But these" — Norah's long fingers resting beneath her eyes — "these would take a *lot* of explaining."

"Angel eyes," Lucy said, half to herself.

"That's what Darleen calls them." Angel eyes could see, but better, they could *show*: their pasts, though nothing between death and coming up; present lives, theirs and others'; sometimes, "maybe" — Norah's voice half-skeptical — "the future. But not like prophecy."

"That's your opinion," Lucy said at once. This was obviously some kind of bone between them; Drew knew that look when Lucy wore it. "*I* think —"

"What we *know*" — cutting her off — "ain't much. From what we can prove, the future stuff is all jumbled, garbled, like flipping channels too fast. Likes runes, or oracle talk. Hard to figure out, and harder to believe."

"Bullshit," said Lucy promptly. "What about when Darleen's sister —"

"I wouldn't exactly call that prophecy, Lucy, but if you —"

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"Wait a minute, wait a minute." Drew waved his beer can, head aching worse than his back. "I don't know what the hell you guys are talking about."

Norah, abrupt: "Would you like to show him?" And Lucy, just as sharp: "*Fine.*" Then swiveling to Drew, taking a breath, and her eyes came alive.

Still silver, but in the background, and the scenes she chose convinced him: their last fight, her shouts, his shouts, the Lucy in her eyes yelling, "If only God'd made me an artist instead of an R.N.," and all the rest of it. He didn't cry; almost, but last night had cried him out. Instead he was wretched, and looked it. When the scene was through, he squeezed his own eyes shut and said, in a voice too low to be heard without straining, "I am so sorry, Luce."

"Babe." Fondly, rubbing his shoulder; she had meant, some, to punish, and in succeeding could be gracious. "Forget it; it's over now; we're back together. I just did that one because I knew you'd remember it real good, enough to catch all the details. I can do a lot of other ones, too. Everything I remember, and even some things I didn't remember till I did 'em. Do you remember once we went to Six Flags with Marsh and MaryLee and—"

"Thing is" — Norah, hands on knees, her own eyes aswirl with pictures too fluid to decipher — "nobody can figure out why we can do this, or what it means that we can. Lucy thinks we can prophesy, too. I don't, but I don't know for sure, either, and we *can* show some version of the future. What all this has to do with coming up, and why funeral homes aren't too busy putting in revolving doors, I don't know, and neither does anyone else."

"Or" — Lucy, looking thoughtful — "why we don't come up where we went down."

"Right. All we know is what we've learned from each other in the time we've been together. And it's not enough. We don't even know if there are other people like us."

Drew rubbed his forehead. God, what a headache. The smell of the house was worse in daylight: ancient slatboard stink and the dry reek of dust and old mildew, crawling up the walls. A spider strolled past his foot, and he crushed it at once, grinding it into the linoleum with childish violence. "Why don't you use your angel eyes to find out? If you can see the present, like you say, then you should be able to look around and see if—"

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"We tried," Lucy said. "Didn't work."

"Well, why haven't you tried a little recon on your own? What about doing what you did to me, that glamour or whatever?"

"Too short-term." Norah, long brows together, teeth bending a thumbnail. Her skin looked even whiter than Lucy's; maybe it was the black, black hair. "Believe me, I've thought of all the avenues. Lots of time for contemplation, you know." Lovely, bitter face, turning away. "All the time in the world."

A silence, lasting too long, the smell of the house suddenly too much, and he stood, uncomfortable, saying, "I gotta take a leak." Out to breathe sunny air, deep breaths like relief, like coming up from the catacombs. Coming up, ugh. From the corner of his eye, he could see Wesley, amateur entomologist, conducting another of his experiments in metaphysics, crouched with the peanut butter jar a holy inch from his face. Drew passed him carefully without speaking. Do not disturb.

They were arguing, Norah and Lucy, arguing over him: Lucy's voice scaling to the high C of anger — oh, did he know that voice — and Norah's voice deeper and more vehement: "— set up housekeeping?"

"I don't see where it's any of your damn business."

"What you're afraid of is that once he takes off, he'll never be back."

"And what are you afraid of, Norah? Huh? What scares you?"

As he walked in, the argument stopped; not ended, stopped, both sets of shining eyes turning toward him, tracking him, as he moved. They both seemed to be waiting for him to speak up then and there, make one win and one lose. "Listen," he said, conscious more than ever of his body, the sheer physical weariness, the aches and the pains, things they obviously no longer considered or cared to, "listen, I am just really worn-out, you know? I've been driving all this whole last week, and I gotta be somewhere in the next couple days." To Lucy's narrowed gaze: "I'm supposed to be at Robin's by the end of the week." Her gaze narrowed even further; Robin had always topped her shit list. "Listen" — suddenly angry — "I never asked for any of this shit, you know it?" Silence. "And I have a commission, this guy in Florida, he —" Fleeting, unhappy thought of how little money he would have after Jim Elliot's check was gone. God, what a mess all this was. He would have to think about it, think a way through, but right now he was tired, too tired to do anything but sleep. Saying nothing else, he passed them, out again to his car, where he rolled down all the windows

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and clipped his key chain to a belt loop — no one was going to be taking any unscheduled drives, no, uh-uh — and before the next thought, his eyes had closed; he was asleep.

He woke to heat, early afternoon, his legs cramped but his headache gone. He was hungry, thirsty for something other than warm beer, and after finger-combing his hair and changing T-shirts to one a half-shade cleaner (its block-lettered motto, "To Think Is to Act, Only You Don't Have to Stand Up," seeming peculiarly apropos), he backed out and away, the engine shockingly loud in the heat and empty quiet, the smell of growth and wild decay. Hair and eyes at the window, Norah watching him go, as silent as the landscape.

The town was even drearier in daylight than in nightfall's rain: garish 7-Eleven and frowsy Frostee Boy, fat-bellied mothers and kids with faces clowned with the day's playtime dirt, a Laundromat, Shirlee's, Best Bros. Funeral Home (shiver of hilarity, all present and accounted for?), a gas station. He bypassed the liquor store, doubled back to the more crowded 7-Eleven, where he thought there was less chance of being recognized. Buying the things he needed — enough for two, maybe three, days — he was grateful no one remarked on his presence; he felt exposed, conspicuous, the stranger in town. What if someone followed him, just to see, just for something to do? Like those two boys there, big boys, sitting smoking in their panel-rusted pickup, watching him. Were they watching him?

He drove well within the speed limit, heading in the opposite direction for five, eight, thirteen miles, sweating every time a car came up behind. The gas gauge said a quarter of a tank, enough to get him to the house, and maybe to a gas station in the next town, wherever that was — he damn well wasn't going back *there* again. Ugly nowhere place.

At the house he angled into the same spot, thought better of it, and pulled up even closer, hiding place. He sat on the hood to drink his Pepsi, sweat on his upper lip, on his back, under his arms. Lucy came out to sit beside him, shading her eyes from the glare off the bumper, and he felt like laughing.

"Got what you needed?" He nodded. "Drew, what're you gonna —"

"Right now I'm gonna drink this Pepsi, if that's O.K. with you." He rubbed the coolness of the can against his lips. One of Lucy's hands finger-walked down his thigh, up again, down again.

"I know this is hard for you," she said.

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He switched the can to his other hand, put his arm around her. "I missed you," he said.

She kissed him. He kissed her back, the can leaving his hand to roll, red and shiny blue, into the long sweep of grass, like sinking to the bottom of a pool. She kissed him harder, and he led her back into the car, onto the front seat, arms trembling as he lowered himself atop her, the smell of her in his mouth, her hair in his eyes.

Then after, rubbing his back, not complaining though his weight pressed her down and she had always disliked that (maybe it didn't bother her anymore?) "What're you going to do, Drew?" A voice softer, somehow, than before, but with an edge to it as foreign as her eyes. "Are you gonna stay?"

"Luce, I have things I—"

"Selfish as usual" — gunpowder temper with a faster flash point — "and please get off me; you're crushin' my stomach."

She slid out from under him in one neat, pretty motion, pulled T-shirt on, and sat glaring. "Lucy" — leaning forward — "I wish you would just understand that—"

"I understand that you were out drinking with Robin Butterman while I was dying." And that was the end of that conversation.

He sat alone in the baking car, fished another can of Pepsi from the back. She had died, and he had not, and there was no way to make that equation equal, no way to atone for the sin of outliving her. No matter what happened, what he did or didn't, her death would always be there, big black grand slam on the scoreboard, casting its shadow before her like a scepter for a queen. "Shitfire" — leveling himself free of the greenhouse front seat, hunting the dashboard for the sunglasses that were sometimes there.

Norah sat on the ruin of the front porch, looking at the road and the trees, smoking. Long plume of silver smoke, her head arched back like a fire-eater's, eyes closing in the sun. Her throat was as white and pure as a porcelain vase. When he sat beside her, she silently offered him a cigarette. He had stopped smoking two years before; he lit up like a condemned man.

"This is all too weird for me," he said, almost apologetic, looking as she did toward the road. Something, some bug, rose high above the grass, shimmered like a dragonfly before it swooped away.

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"Speaking of weird, how'd you like the town?" And when Drew rolled his eyes, she laughed. "Yeah, they're bigger freaks than we'll ever be." She made a smoke ring, watched its perfect dazzle fade on the brightening breeze. "Do you know, when I first came here, I used to sit out here with a pocketknife, a little green pocketknife, and cut my finger" — demonstrating, imaginary blade biting left forefinger — "just like that, over and over again. It was just like a mouth, you know? The cut, I mean. And I would do it over and over, just to watch the little mouth open and close." She laughed again. "You should see your face. Lucy caught me at it once and yelled her head off. She was scared. I scared her."

You scare me, too, he thought, but didn't say it. She dropped the cigarette, ground it out with her heel. Her bare heel. "I don't like it here," she said, and went into the house.

Lucy came to him again, but not until night, late, her skin like milk and snow in the strong moonlight, her blunt little fingers digging into his back. But her heart wasn't in it, and she left him soon after, not angry but somehow sad, and far away. She had bound her hair into a little pigtail, and it made him want all at once to cry. He wished she had something better to wear than those fucking cutoffs. He should give her his clothes, something. He opened a beer, but the first swallow almost gagged him. He stood, reached to scale the can into the darkness, then thought better of it and poured it out, yellow gurgle between his bare feet, warm and flat as piss. Pepsi or nothing, then.

Of course, tomorrow, or the day after, there would be no more Pepsi, no more Oreos, no more twisted strings of beef jerky like mummy's fingers (God, what a thought: no more beef jerky for him), nothing at all to eat, and he was damn sure not going back into town. Maybe there was something in the next town, maybe a McDonald's where he could use the bathroom, get a wash. He had to be pretty rank by now. "The dead have no noses," he said aloud, deep fake anchorman voice, and cracked up, head back against the seat, his laugh winding down like an engine's sighing stall. He had to do something, and pretty quick, too. Maybe find a phone, call Robin, and — what? Not explain, no, but say something. What? Dunno, but by now Robin must be starting to wonder; Drew had never been punctual, but he had never before failed to show up. Would Robin start making phone calls, asking around? Would he call the Dooleys? (God what *about* the Dooleys? Should he tell them about Lucy? *Fuck.*) And what

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about Jim Elliot and his advance check? (Which would soon be history. Don't think about it.) There was work to do, money accepted; wasn't it fraud to keep money when you had no intention of doing the work? It was some kind of stealing, anyway, and if Jim Elliot thought he, Drew, was ripping him off, he was in a position to do something about it. Gee, Mr. Elliot, I guess I lost track of the time; I met up with my dead girlfriend, and we got to talking — you know how it is.

Hot breeze dwindling to no breeze, cold-looking stars up overhead; what a fuckin' mess he was in, and no mistake. A big shape moved before him, startling him into fear, and it took an overdrive moment before he knew it for Wesley, which was still pretty scary, so he went inside. No sign of Norah, or Lucy, just Edie and Darleen, alone in the empty house. Edie was brushing and braiding Darleen's hair and telling her the story of Rapunzel, her voice the gentle monotone one uses to soothe a cranky child; Darleen, somewhere in her twenties when she took that last joyride, was obviously loving both the story and the hairdressing; her eyes were closed, and from his unobtrusive post by the door, Drew could almost hear her blissful purr. He watched for a while, saying nothing, listening to the story with half an ear, when suddenly Darleen's eyes popped open like shades rattling to, and in them a jerky scene of himself, going, leaving. She wasn't smiling, and Edie wasn't, either, so he took the hint and left them there, mother and daughter, alone in the dark. Storytime.

Restless, he went outside again, circling wide around the big, bug-hunting figure in the outer yard, sticking to the spaces between house and, what? Shed? Garage? Whatever it was, it was just this side of falling down. He couldn't see the stars now: the green overhead was too dark, midnight green like the paint on the shed, long blisters that he peeled with his absent fingers to show the rotting wood beneath. He thought he heard voices, imagined them Norah's and Lucy's, but then they stilled, and he heard nothing, nothing but the bending grass of Wesley's passing, nothing but the circle of the stars.

NOT YET light, but coming to it, and he did hear voices now, their voices: Lucy's very high and tight; Norah's clipped, biting off each word like teeth through crackling tinfoil. They were close by the car, very close; by sitting up even a little, he could see them, leaning into each other's face. If they were men, they

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would be punching by now, and in fact, Lucy was raising her hand, and he held his breath, but then she dropped it, turned, abrupt, fluid, graceful stomp away. Toward the field, while Norah's stomp took her toward the house and him. "What the hell're *you* looking at?" she snarled, pausing by the car door. "Never seen a catfight before?"

Stay cool, he told himself; don't make it worse. "You guys woke me up." Small, neutral shrug. "Couldn't help hearing."

"Well, then, I suppose you heard your girlfriend's plan, such as it is. If it were I, I think I might object to a honeymoon here on Hell's little acre, but maybe you think that's a fine idea." She lit up a cigarette, tiny fire flare showing pictures in her eyes, fast-forward, much too much to see. "You know, it's funny" — mean-eyes, blowing smoke in his face, silver cloud — "she hates your guts for leaving her, but she —"

"I didn't leave her! I just, I wasn't there, but I *never* —"

"Personally" — cutting him off, shutting him down — "I don't give a shit. I know you're not about to start a talent search on my say-so, but she thinks you're going to run off first chance you get."

"Well, what if I did?" Riled now himself, voice getting louder, argument range. He imagined the others listening. Let 'em. "What if you all did? What's keeping you here, anyway?"

"I'll tell you something." Leaning into him, hair swinging, eyes too fast, and she knew it and slowed it down, standing still so he could get a good look.

Looking: and he saw her, sick, sick in bed, puking blood on green sheets and white floor, two people, parents, sitting on visitors' chairs, blood on her mother's cheap nylons, and Norah saying, "I got fucked more ways than one," and it came like a chant, the first words of a strange, strange song, and he realized that she was crying: beautiful, shocking, strands long and silver, not like water but tinsel; tears from angel eyes fragile as angel's breath, more tears as the pictures changed, every fear, every bad thing that ever happened, ever could happen in a hospital, every bad thing that had happened to her in the terrible course of her illness, all of it magnified into a grotesquerie greater even than its fact. Shadow on her face like clouds before the moon, and her voice, low and rageful: "One good look at me, all it would take is once, and then a cage in some kind of *hospital* — put me away; you bet I'm fuckin' scared, because I won't, I will never, *ever*, GO BACK TO THAT!" Screaming, the tears something else

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now, squirming lines, twisting in the dirt as she screamed even louder, then stopped as if her throat had been cut. And he heard it, too, then: feet on the gravel road, a man's voice, not Wesley's, a voice just crossed over to manhood and eager to prove it. "C'mon this way." It carried like a shout, and Norah grabbed his arm, sharp nails digging in, rushing him through the tall grass, weeds whispering around his legs.

He didn't think about Lucy. It shamed him when he finally did, crouched breathless behind a pile of John Deere junk and rusting paint cans in the shed, ratshit between his toes. Norah's eyes shone, then stopped; she had sunglasses, his old sunglasses, capping the beacon, hiding what a flashlight might find. His heart was beating so hard he thought he might faint, fall over, throw up; his hands were colder than hers.

"I seen one of 'em" — oh my God, how close they were; he could hear them through the broken window — "big one runnin' off across the field. We can get that one later, if you want" — and a second and third voice deciding, speculating — "well, I just don't want —" And a shriek — high, not Lucy; Edie maybe, or Darleen — and the voices outside the window broke into shouts and ran, heading for the house.

Norah's lips against his ear, hoarse: "Past the field there're trees; can you climb?" And her voice was so small he could hardly hear it, hardly believe that the other, the sentry, had hardly had time to think before he was knocking things over to run, run, full-bore onto something sharp, and he grunted at the pain in his foot — it hurt so bad he had, he just had to slow up, Norah ahead like a ghost, a vanishing point of light, spirit guide. He dropped to one knee — had he cut his fucking foot off, or what? — and then the sound before the pain: boom. A little boom. And then a very big pain, so big as to dwarf the one in his foot, so big as to steal his breath. He fell right over from his one-kneed crouch, on his back in the weeds, staring at the stars and feeling, somehow, as if he could not move without instructions.

They came, finally. Four men, just past being boys. The littlest one carried the rifle, and it was his voice that cried, "Oh shit, this one's normal; this one's just a guy!" And he wanted to tell them it hardly mattered, because this one was pretty close to being worm chow, anyway. God, this had turned out to be a real kinghell mess, now, hadn't it? If only things would stop hurting. The boys were gone. Had Norah gotten away? Lucy. Oh Luce, I am really just so fucking sorry. I guess you were right before: I

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never am there when you need me. God, this hurts. A bug, walking across his face — tiny, tickling, questing feet — and he wanted to say, "Look out for Wesley," but there really just was no air, no air left. Vacuum, and dark coming down as the sun came up. Like, like a glamour.

"Cold down there," he said to himself. "Cold, *cold* down there." It was all he could think to say. He pushed, but his arms were weak, the muscles stretched and tired as if he'd spent the night slinging pianos. Pushed again. Like giving birth. And that made him laugh; he had to laugh at that. Pretty bright for nighttime: he could see every hair on his arms, see the dance of the blood beneath his white skin.

The ground seemed to suck at him, dirt in his nose and dirt in his toes and dirt up his tired ass, but he was persistent; that was all it took, sticking to the job till it was done. "Cold up here, too," he mumbled when he was free, sat beside the tunnel his body had made to wipe the dirt away as best he could. Being naked didn't help, either: he saw the goosebumps rise, flash flood of them, and that was kind of funny, too, but this time he lay back to laugh; to rest. Such a pretty moon tonight, all silver, bright as a quarter, as a shiny eye. "Bring some clothes," he said aloud, "bring some clothes when you come," and closed his angel eyes.

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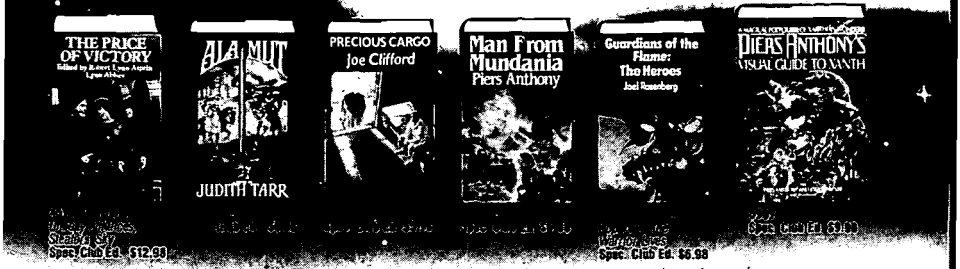

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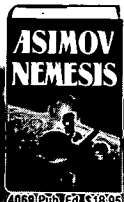

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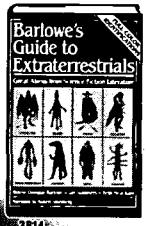

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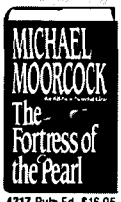

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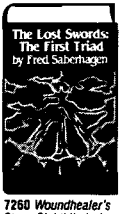

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